University of Alberta

Death in the First-Person: A Thematic Analysis of the Representation of Mortality in Four Films

by

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DEDICATION

To my father, for whom the journey into the unknown has begun.

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To Mama and Tata: Thank you for always believing in me and for surrounding me with an impenetrable circle of comfort and support. I love you both and I am truly grateful to have been blessed with such wonderful parents. Tata, I hope you know how much you continue to influence me and how proud I am to be your daughter. I miss you every day.

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To my Kidlets: Izidora, you are the one who started me on this path. You are my greatest love and my most profound blessing. Blake, Meghan, and Adam, you have filled my life with happiness and joy and I feel lucky to have the privilege of loving you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER I: SYNOPSES

A Pure Formality 12

Jacob's Ladder 13

The Sixth Sense 14

The Others 15

CHAPTER II: *A PURE FORMALITY*
In death we find ourselves alone 16

CHAPTER III: *JACOB'S LADDER*
Heaven is what you want it to be 31

CHAPTER IV: *THE SIXTH SENSE*
Learning to let go . . . of life and of innocence 48

CHAPTER V: *THE OTHERS*
When death has been mistaken for life 72

CONCLUSION 95

BIBLIOGRAPY 100

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will explore in detail four films that take a distinct and unusual perspective on death and the anxieties it creates. While many films have focused on the subject of death, either as a theme or as a narrative device, the four films that will be discussed here are unique in their confrontation of the dread and even horror often associated with death. They also function as vehicles for the viewer to address the emotional aspects of facing the notion of mortality and attempt to delve into the fear of what cannot be known. They are Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality* (1994), Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001). The purpose of this examination is to explore these individual films and the contexts in which they exist in relation to the viewer. As well, the methods by which these films achieve their emotional force will be described and analyzed. A close-reading methodology will be used as an effective approach for the detailed study of these films, which make a strong and insinuating emotional appeal to the viewer, and therefore serve as mechanisms by which the process of death and loss are examined on a visceral and intuitive level.

Each of these films represent death and the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead as a first-person experience, a journey that cannot be duplicated in life. These narratives exist from the perspective of the dead protagonists and so the viewer is aligned with not only the characters forced to leave their lives behind, but with the notion of facing death and mortality. The viewer is positioned in the very context of a perceived afterlife because each of these narratives begins with

the death of their protagonists, although this is not revealed until the end of each film. The focus, then, is clearly on death and the manner in which the characters in these films face their own mortality. For the viewer, feelings of apprehension and anxiety associated with the inevitability of death are confronted and made tangible through the experiences of fictional people who have been to a realm from which the living viewer could never return.

Since these films belong to a larger body of dialogue regarding death and the afterlife as represented in cinema, it will first be necessary to define what they are NOT. These four films are distinct in that they are not typical of mainstream Hollywood narratives although three of them belong exactly in that category of production and even the fourth, *A Pure Formality*, although it is a French film, presents the familiar faces of Gérard Depardieu and Roman Polański. This examination of a very specific sub-group can then resume its course toward defining the ramifications of confronting death as represented in these four films, culminating in an understanding of these powerful narratives as expressed through mise-en-scène, characterization, and emotional identification with the viewer.

Each of these films involves the application of a narrative structure to the concept of death, concluding with a tidy outcome that leaves few loose ends; death is defined not as an end, but merely as a resolution to a narrative. However, there is something powerful about these films in that they do not attempt to normalize or gloss over the implications of death. The sadness and loss that lingers in these films evoke a poignant, haunted quality, particularly when the line between fiction and reality becomes increasingly blurred as the climax of each plot gains its force through a

revelation. The role of the viewer is paramount, for, as Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin suggest, the ability for human beings to reflect upon death allows the viewer to achieve an important kind of power (Bronfen, Goodwin 3). While all fictions bear some kind of meaning outside their imagined worlds, these films function on an emotional level, a level that transcends the boundaries of "reality" and addresses for the viewer the fear and even horror associated with the unknowable realm of death. It is an event that everyone must face, but for which no one can prepare. The experience any viewer may have with death can only be by proxy, and perhaps that is the very root of the anxiety surrounding this final stage of life. The loss of a loved one is often felt to bring unbearable pain; the loss cannot be negotiated, or reversed, or controlled in any way. To experience the effects of the death of another is to directly face not only the fragility of life, but also the unforgiving truth surrounding its inevitable end. These films address this feeling of having life ripped away and they do so in a manner that cannot be experienced in life: the protagonists in each of these films have mistaken death for life – they do not realize that they are dead, or about to be dead. Where in reality death can only be felt as something that happens to someone else, these films represent it as a first-person experience by aligning the protagonists with the viewer and by invoking elements of a surrealist representation. However, this does not create any sense of alienation on the part of the viewer. And while each of these films employ a number of religious motifs (primarily Christian), none of them are representative of a dogmatic approach or message. It is only in relation to the strict dogma of organized religion that these films may appear fragmented and distanced. However, none of these films could be easily positioned as secular either. So this in-

between approach to religious and philosophical notions does not require an adherence to an overarching structure and allows for permeability in both context and interpretation. In fact, it is through this representation of death in the first-person that the films are able to address the notion on both an individual level and collective level - the level on which a person fears his or her own end, and the level on which the death of a loved one creates an irrevocable change in the lives of so many. The purpose of this examination is to chronicle the specific motifs in each of these films that lend themselves to an understanding of a socially accepted interpretation of death and to present a proposition regarding the significance of these visually presented narratives.

Death has been used as a device in many films in order to facilitate the discussion of other themes; death has also functioned as the theme itself. Because these four films operate on a distinct and sparsely populated plane, it is useful to briefly explore some of the more recognizable examples of films dealing with similar concepts and then detail the major differences between the more common products and the four films to be studied here. Often, films explore notions of an afterlife or out-of-body experience on a symbolic level, where the narrative employs a symbolic passing from this world to another. An example is Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), where Dorothy's physical body is lying in bed sick with fever yet in her dream, she experiences a more vibrant and colourful world that is even more real than her own. More commonly, narratives imply that there exists some kind of existence after physical death. For example, Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), widely acclaimed by critics and well-received by audiences, is narrated by the main character who, from the beginning of the film, is actually dead. He is telling this story in

retrospect from the Other Side, claiming to have answers that we, as viewers, cannot have because we are still living. While each of these works, as well as the many others that would be too numerous to list, employ various mechanisms to explore notions of death and the afterlife, the message is that somehow, beyond or outside the realm of existence as we experience it, knowledge can be gained. In specifically addressing the potential for cinema to facilitate the acquisition of this knowledge, Bill Nichols views the medium as "a socially constructed category serving socially significant ends" (Nichols 37). Where she is bombarded with the problems of daily life on her Kansas farm, in a vivid and magical hallucination, Dorothy learns that there is no place like home. Where Lester lives an unhappy and unfulfilled existence, in death he gains a sense of peace, satisfaction, and knowledge and is able to appreciate the beauty of life.

There have been many films that have addressed death and the afterlife through drama and even comedy, whether simply as context or as the primary force that drives the narrative. The list of such films is extremely large and is not relevant to the discussion at hand, except to provide a point of distinction in relation to the four films treated here. The representation of death in cinema, whether an end in itself or a means to explore notions of an afterlife may be more manageably discussed by creating categories that reflect how these films work. One such category would include films that attempt to teach the viewer a moral lesson by demonstrating the afterlife experiences of their protagonists. Another would include films that use the implications surrounding death merely as a context in which to tell a story and yet another might include films that use death as a mechanism by which the problems of a real physical existence can be overcome through narrative.

A few arbitrary, yet representative examples of films that deal with issues of life after death include *The Devil and Max Devlin* (1981), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), and *Jack Frost* (1998). In *The Devil and Max Devlin*, Elliott Gould's character returns from the dead and strikes a deal with the Devil in an attempt to save his soul from the fires of Hell by manipulating innocent people into signing their own souls away. In the end, he develops a conscience and fails to deliver the promised payment to Bill Cosby's Satan, but by doing so is redeemed himself. This is one of the group of films dealing with the afterlife that sends a message; like a children's fable, the story is meant to teach a lesson that the ideal viewer would be able to apply to his own life, without having to suffer a journey to the fiery flames of Hell. In Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*, Robin Williams plays a man plagued by the death of his children and the suicide of his wife who travels to the Other Side in order to save her soul from damnation. The film becomes an extrapolation – merely a new space for narrative to exist. As Joseph Natoli puts it, "when we die we get a chance to pursue what we imagine to be our self-interest. And that self-interest has already been imagined in life" (Natoli 271). In this context, the afterlife is merely a backdrop; this film is representative of those dealing more with a grand narrative such as "love conquers all" rather than offering any real insight into coping with loss or even a hypothesis regarding life after death.

The last major category of films about death or the afterlife is that in which death allows characters to accomplish a task or achieve a goal that they could not have accomplished or achieved in life. An example of this is Troy Miller's *Jack Frost*, in which Michael Keaton's character fails as a father but after dying in a car accident, is

able to "come back" as a giant snowman and reconcile with his son by becoming the father he never was. These objectives are all achieved through the powerful force of visual representation.

> The visual is no longer a means of verifying the certainty of facts pertaining to an objective, external world and truths about this world conveyed linguistically. The visual now constitutes the terrain of subjective experience as the locus of knowledge, and power. (Nichols 42)

It is only through death that Jack is able to see the mistakes he has made, learn from them, and gain a sense of peace. Much like *American Beauty* in this regard, these films do little to enlighten their audiences because they propose a solution that, in their own words, cannot be known to the living. They are simply a means by which real-life problems can be solved by applying a narrative that is in no way a plausible solution. Rather than address social, familial, or personal issues associated with death on a recognizable level, many of these films impose a new narrative space, an afterlife, where real problems are solved using artificial and constructed means.

This brings us to the focus of this thesis - a much smaller subsection of films dealing with the representation of *death as life* and the consequences for the protagonists of this realization. While there are likely other films that can be included and the four that will be discussed here are by no means a definitive group, the list is certainly a highly restricted one compared to the aforementioned categories. In films like Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, the theme of life after death takes place in the well-established context of Christian doctrine, complete with Biblical names and a passage to light in the former and an "and

a child will lead them" scenario in the latter. However, the films fit more comfortably, although not exclusively, in the secular sphere. Two other films that present a version of an afterlife are Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality* and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others*. These films derive their force from powerful narratives that operate affectively by addressing the emotional needs of the viewer regarding feelings of fundamental loss and sadness. They employ numerous expressive devices and demonstrate a deliberate and affective function of mise-en-scène. Further, they serve to put the life of the viewer into perspective by assigning a specific narrative machine to the process of death and loss. These four films each attempt to explore death as an experience that every individual will have, but that none of us can know. They are unique in their articulation of feelings and emotions, namely the fear of mortality and the anxiety associated with the weakness of life.

A device common to many narratives, particularly Hollywood films, is emotional identification. This strategy is useful in drawing the viewer into the story and persuades him to relate to one or more characters, usually the protagonist. In his analysis of the selected writings of Jean Baudrillard, Mark Poster states that "death is always simultaneously that which awaits us at the system's *term*, and the *extermination* of the system itself" (Poster 123). Keeping this in mind, a film that would effectively address the notion of death must then travel a fine line between meaningful commentary and practical analysis. In order to achieve this, it would seem that emotional identification with the characters by the viewer is necessary for the ramifications of death as experienced by the protagonists to be relevant. Like Aristotle's praise of catharsis in his *Poetics*, identification allows the viewer to benefit

from the message of the film. In his treatise regarding the analysis of *Oedipus the King*, Aristotle positions catharsis as the most important factor if a drama is to be successful. While the medium here is film, identification would seem to be the most powerful tool to allow the audience a cathartic experience. However, the notion of identification is extremely convoluted and has been applied using various theories, not the least of which include feminism and psychoanalytic theory. David Bordwell argues that the notion of identification as argued by Noel Carroll and Murray Smith is problematic, by stating that there is simply too much ground to cover when attempting to define and clarify aspects related to the process of identification regarding characters on the screen and viewers in the audience. However, the four films that will be addressed here create a sense of identification not only on the level of individual characters, but by using the experience of death as a unifying idea. Although he reluctantly addresses notions of identification in cinema, Bordwell cites "at least one feminist theorist" who has suggested that a spectator might identify with an entire scene or narrative (Bordwell 16-17) and so might identify with a concept or idea.

In these four films, however, the emotional investment the viewer places in each of the protagonists can perhaps be better defined using Carl Platinga's "bond of allegiance" (Platinga 380) where the objective is ultimately met by allowing for a significant representation of death and by having this representation serve as a symbol for the emotional needs of the viewer. The obscure notion of identification is traversed by sincere emotional relevance; death is not presented as an obstacle to be overcome by the narrative, nor is it presented as the basis on which a lighthearted comedy can ensue. These films address the gravity of fundamental loss and deep sadness associated with

experiencing the fragility of life and they encourage the viewer to acknowledge his own mortality. This is primarily achieved through affective characterization and mise-en-scène; each of the main characters in these four films exists in the context of loss and absence, and these qualities are written onto their faces as well as onto the physical environments they inhabit. The viewer is persuaded to identify, so to speak, with the mood and tone of not only the characters, but of the entire landscape of the film. Further, if there is no definitive point at which everyone may agree that human life begins, it might be felt that by analogy the point at which life ends is clouded by opposing belief systems and the issue of representing death becomes convoluted, if not problematic.

> Representation presupposes an original presence, and in the case of death, that is clearly paradoxical. In any representation of death, it is strikingly an absence that is at stake, so that the presentation is itself at a remove from what is figured. (Bronfen, Goodwin 7)

In supposing that there is indeed a space in which we exist after we die, the films present characters faced with the knowledge that they are dead which parallel the living viewer coping with feelings of loss, including the loss of power and authority as a result of the representational act (Bronfen, Goodwin 8). Perhaps more powerfully, death is used as the mechanism by which these feelings are explored and the viewer is encouraged to face his own mortality. While death is a concrete notion in each film and is not used entirely on a symbolic level, it is not the focus of the emotional force of these films. Rather, "death puts its distinctive stamp on human existence"

(Thielicke 59-60) and the feelings associated with the horror of "being over" and the seemingly irrational need to disavow and deny the inevitability of death are at the forefront of these films. As the protagonists discover that they have mistaken death for life and can no longer deny their fate, the sense of loss is reconciled by developing the idea that although life is fragile, it is subject to interpretation and is never actually finished.

This examination will now begin with a brief synopsis of each film, followed by a close and detailed reading of each film in chapter form, beginning with *A Pure Formality*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *The Sixth Sense*, and finally, *The Others*. The discussion of each film will focus on its context in relation to the viewer, the methods and devices by which each film engages and affects the viewer, and the manner in which each film addresses the emotional needs of the viewer regarding the fear associated with confronting human mortality.

Chapter I: SYNOPSES

A Pure Formality

Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality* begins in a dark wooded area, where the viewer is introduced to Onoff (Gérard Depardieu), a famous writer who has been detained by the police because he is not able to provide identification. Later, as he is being interrogated by the Inspector (Roman Polański), he learns, as does the viewer, that he stands accused of murder. Onoff and the Inspector engage in a psychological battle and it is revealed that Onoff is actually in some kind of interim realm of existence; the death for which he has been blamed is his own. He committed suicide the night before and was detained by officers who would lead him to the Inspector, where he would be assisted in coming to the realization that he is dead. Onoff leaves the station grateful for the support of this group of people as another man begins his own journey of discovery. The film closes with Onoff in the back of a van, being driven off into the countryside.

Jacob's Ladder

Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* begins in the jungles of Vietnam where the focus is on an American platoon. Jacob Singer, the protagonist of the film, is presented as a gentle and good-spirited man, the optimist of the group. Soon, members of the platoon enter into a strange and seemingly unexplained rage as they begin to fire their weapons recklessly. Jacob is surrounded by dead bodies and chaos as he is jolted awake from what appears to have been a flashback. This scene in Vietnam is referred to in retrospect many times throughout the film as Jacob tries to come to terms with his post-war experience, not the least of which is coping with the death of his son and the loss of his family. He lives with a woman, Jezebel, who is not particularly sensitive to his emotional struggle as he embarks on a search for inner peace. The film depicts Jacob losing his grip on reality as he begins to confuse hallucinations with real events. By the end of the film, Jacob's life with Jezebel in the city is shown to be some kind of psychic projection; he dies on the operating table in a make-shift hospital in Vietnam. The viewer understands that Jacob was fatally wounded during the opening scenes of the film and that he is now joining his lost son, with whom he climbs a large staircase toward a bright light as the doctors offer comments over his lifeless body.

The Sixth Sense

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* begins with protagonist Malcolm Crowe and his wife sharing a romantic evening in celebration of his receiving an award for his work as a child psychologist. An intruder, a patient of Malcolm's as a child, breaks in and shoots Malcolm and then himself. A recovered Malcolm is plagued by guilt for not being able to help the man and pours himself into treating another young boy, Cole Sear, even at the expense of his marriage. It is revealed that Cole's issue is not so much one of a psychological nature, but that he is in fact burdened with the ability to communicate with the dead. Malcolm is hesitant to believe this at first, but then realizes that the boy is telling the truth and the two of them attempt to understand Cole's role in such a situation. They decide that Cole must talk to these wandering souls who do not understand that they are dead in order to help them achieve a sense of closure and move into another phase of existence. Shortly after successfully helping the spirit of a young girl murdered by her mother, Cole leads Malcolm to the realization that their relationship has not been an accident. Although Malcolm has helped Cole cope with the burden of his ability, Cole has helped Malcolm in a surprising manner. While he talks to his sleeping wife as Cole had suggested, Malcolm understands that he died from the gunshot at the beginning of the film; the realization is horrific. However, he comes to terms with his situation and is able to say goodbye to his wife and presumably leave this world behind.

The Others

Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* opens with still images of drawings depicting the Creation Story. The film is centered on three main protagonists: Grace, (Nicole Kidman), and her two young children, Anne and Nicholas. The story is set in the British Channel Islands shortly after the Second World War. Grace and her children are alone on the large estate; they appear to have lost the family patriarch to the war and the servants abandoned the house in the night. Grace is a strict disciplinarian although she clearly loves her children and takes great care to protect them from harm and danger. One of these dangers stems from a rare disorder with which the children are afflicted that causes a terrible, perhaps fatal reaction to any kind of light, and so they must all live in darkness. As Grace hires three servants to replace those who have left, a number of inconsistencies arise and it seems that the staff may have malicious intentions. Further, the older child, Anne, begins to communicate with what appear to be ghosts, although Grace refuses to believe her daughter at first, despite her own experiences with strange and inexplicable occurrences. However, by the end of the film, it is revealed that Anne has not been communicating with ghosts; rather, the servants have returned to the house in which they died to help Grace and her children realize that they too have passed into another realm of existence. The "ghosts" Anne sees are in fact living people who now live in the house after Grace killed her two children and then herself. The film closes with the unwanted family leaving, and Grace reluctantly accepting her situation, vowing to continue her existence in the house with her children.

CHAPTER II: *A PURE FORMALITY*
In death we find ourselves alone

Three of the four films to be discussed present a seemingly complex narrative, where a number of subplots function to drive the action in a suspenseful motion toward a surprising climax. *A Pure Formality*, however, uses an extremely minimalist approach in order to convey the gravity of coping with loss and accepting one's fate as it allows just for the role of the Guide, in the form of the Inspector, played by Roman Polański. As Philippe Ariès states, no one wants to be the bearer of news to a loved one that he is dying due to the "fear of hurting him and depriving him of hope, the temptation [being] to protect him by leaving him in ignorance of his imminent end" (Ariès 561). However, exposing the death and assisting in the reconciliation to the loss of life is exactly the role of the Inspector in *A Pure Formality*, Cole Sear in *The Sixth Sense*, and the servants in *The Others*. Jacob Singer's chiropractor Louis helps him reconcile his feelings toward death and Jacob's young son leads him upward toward the light in *Jacob's Ladder* and joins him in a realm beyond the living where a new existence may begin. In *A Pure Formality*, the protagonist is determined to retain his hold on the world he knows and refuses to assist in his own enlightenment. Gérard Depardieu plays Onoff, the central character for whom the entire narrative exists. He is a man disconnected from the world of the living, even before he arrives at the mysterious police station. The film plays out like a mystery - only in the end does the viewer realize that the mystery involves Onoff's own suicide and his ultimate realization that while the nature of his existence has changed, his journey is not over.

The film opens in a forest at dusk. The end of a gun barrel is centered in the frame and the sound of gunfire initiates fast-paced violin music as the camera takes the point of view of someone running frantically through the trees, breathing heavily. Tension and anxiety are the central elements of the tone of the scene and are most pronounced by the frantic camera movement, which is paralleled by the frenzied musical accompaniment. The mood is tense as the viewer is seeing everything from the perspective of the character running until the music stops and the camera flips to perceive a man running down a road through the dark in the pouring rain. Headlights from a vehicle shine on him and a police officer asks for his identification but the man is disoriented and cannot seem to find his wallet in his pockets. The man is Onoff, and he is first introduced to the viewer as a confused and flustered figure in the center of a mysterious set of circumstances that even he does not initially understand.

In the next scene, Onoff is taken to the police station, a dark and dingy building, and instructed to wait for the Inspector. The building is old and derelict, creating a cold and gloomy atmosphere. Even the few staff members, while they seem familiar with working under almost primitive circumstances, contribute to the strangeness of the setting. None of the spaces in which the action takes place (that is to say the various rooms in the station) are particularly small; however, a claustrophobic ambiance persists. This is most pronounced near the beginning and the end of the film when the grey, lifeless building is contrasted with the open air of nature. The interior of the station is shot in dull colours, such as the dark blue and green of the staff uniforms and the cold grey stone of the walls. Even these colours are muted, contributing to the dreary and listless tone of the film. The building is suggestive of an

abandoned and forgotten locale, a place that would not warrant attention, and the incessant downpour of rain that makes its way through each of the many cracks and holes in the roof conjures a setting that might be found in a Kafka story. Onoff even makes the comment that being held in this odd place is reminiscent of a Hollywood B movie, what with the rain and country bumpkin police officers. He is very aggravated, particularly when he is told he must wait for the Inspector before he can make a telephone call. Onoff's frustration is increasing as he informs them that he will be late for an important engagement but the officers are unmoved by his hysterics. Here Onoff begins to take on an almost schizophrenic personality in that at one moment he is agreeable and understanding and at the next he is hostile and erratic. The viewer, also unaware of the circumstances surrounding Onoff's detainment, is situated in the position of the protagonist in order to gain a deeper understanding of the revelation that will ultimately be unleashed upon Onoff.

> The strategic use of psychic doubles, mortal alter egos, surrogates of the self's disintegration, delegates of its renewal may also serve to reflect self-consciously on the process of reading about death from the security of aesthetic distance. Through such encounters within the text turned to parables of textual understanding – again, such displacements displaced – the death of others is often seen to encode our own, a fate to which we must, at one depth of consciousness or another, own up. (Stewart 19)

While Stewart is discussing representations of death in the novel and the reader's position in the fiction, the same notion of catharsis can be applied to the representation of death in cinema, particularly in a film like *A Pure Formality* where the viewer is so closely aligned with the protagonist. During these moments of belligerence toward the

officers and staff of the station, Onoff is beaten and manhandled to some extent, signifying the seriousness of his circumstances, even though he is oblivious to the reason for his detainment, as is the viewer.

When the Inspector finally arrives, Onoff demands to know why he is being held in such an awful place. The cold and austere surroundings are clearly causing him discomfort and the claustrophobic atmosphere is now pronounced by the confined Onoff. The Inspector seems quite agreeable, but also means to confirm his position of authority. He wants to know Onoff's name before answering any of his questions. As it happens, the Inspector is a dedicated reader of the author, Onoff's work. He does not believe that this man before him is the great writer but Onoff is adamant about his identity. When he does not recognize a quoted passage from one of his own books, the Inspector becomes angry and they prepare the office for a formal deposition. This sense of disorientation, as Onoff is genuinely confused by the events that have led him to the station, transports the viewer periodically into a slightly surrealist realm. As well, like Linda Williams description of the Surrealist artistic image, the representation of the station "only pretends to create the illusion of real space" (Williams 12). The juxtaposition of the odd characters at the police station with the predominantly realist depiction of Onoff may be viewed as an example supporting J.H. Matthews's assertion that even in the realm of the surreal, the objective is not to "[widen] the gap between the real and the Surreal, but to [close] it" (Matthews 30). This enables a sense of familiarity for the unsuspecting character of Onoff, as well as for the viewer, in this strange and dream-like setting; however bizarre and strange the locale, it *seems* grounded in the real world.

The young man, André, sets up the typewriter to take the statements. When Onoff quotes another passage from one of his own books, the Inspector finally believes that he is the famous author and apologizes for doubting him while taking on a sympathetic tone. Onoff stares blankly into space and the viewer is again reminded that this character exists in a highly disjointed state; he is disconnected from his surroundings and unable maintain an association with other people. Through flashbacks that seem unfamiliar even to Onoff, it becomes clear that the writer seems better able to involve himself in life as a spectator rather than as a participant, which positions him closer to the viewer of the film than as a character in the narrative. Even in his flashbacks, the viewer is positioned through the eyes of Onoff, which solidifies his position as one who *watches* or writes rather than one who *experiences*. Richard Gerrig and Deborah Prentice argue that such devices assist in the all-important phenomenon of audience response and participation and suggest that a film effective in this area ensures commitment from the viewer, therefore fostering a meaningful viewing experience.

> Under appropriate circumstances, experiencers of narrative produce psychological responses *as if* they were really participating in the events. Formal properties of film – and particularly the ability of film to fix the focus of attention – make it especially likely that such as if responses will occur. (Gerrig, Prentice 389)

Later in the film, Onoff even expresses resentment and indignation at the thought of people wanting to form an emotional connection with him, presumably, even the viewer, who has little choice. The context, then, in relation to the viewer is very direct: like Onoff, the viewer is unaware of the reasons surrounding the protagonist's

detainment and is confined to this gloomy and austere setting. Onoff's confusion is shared by the viewer and the stark yet harsh surroundings serve to assist the viewer in identifying with the emotions associated with Onoff's confinement. By the end of the film, the station is revealed as a place where people must face death; in retrospect, then, it becomes clear that the almost oppressive nature of the building itself and the mystery surrounding Onoff's detainment mirrors the unknown realm of death. More specifically, the film creates an atmosphere of tension and anxiety, even fear, primarily through the setting, and these are the emotions that Onoff (and the viewer) must reconcile when accepting death.

In order to create the appropriate atmosphere in the film, there is a deliberate attention to mise-en-scène. While *A Pure Formality* follows many of the conventions associated with the mystery or crime genre, for the purpose of this discussion, it is necessary to focus on its representation of emotion. It is through mise-en-scène that the film gains its emotional force, and the composition of each shot as well as the overall mood of each of the films to be discussed here is reminiscent of Expressionism as well as Surrealism. In terms of its association with the former, this is demonstrated not only in terms of visual representation, but also in terms of thematic preoccupation, such as each film's attention to madness, folklore, horror, and the Other World. Like many earlier Expressionist works, these films are largely focused on representing the anxiety of their characters and, to some degree, of their viewers.

Visually, elements of distortion are used to personify psychological and emotional disturbance and the artificial representation of nature and life illustrates the unreliability of the world as we know it. Objects are shaped asymmetrically and in a

caricatured manner and are represented as if to imply oppression and collapse; the overall atmosphere is menacing and even fear-inducing, such as the police station in *A Pure Formality*. Much like the asylum in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), the station represents the feeling of being trapped and there is a clear sentiment of uncertainty in this distorted world. The building, then, might be considered another character in the film, as well as other elements of setting directly outside of the building. The bare and cold station, with its stained concrete walls and run down with holes through which the rain outside is pouring, surrounded by darkness and nothingness, works most prominently to create the ominous and chilling mood. Further, this mood is directly linked to the notion that Onoff must face death and the building itself is the manifestation of this concept, a place that induces fear and anxiety because it cannot be known.

Some of the film's effects bear Surrealist traces, primarily through the flashback sequences and Onoff's interpretation of them. The idea that neither Onoff nor the viewer can perceive the flashbacks as authentic recollections hints at a deeper attention to the relationship between the real and surreal, between reality and film.

> The rapid and continuous succession of film images, whose implicit neologism is directly proportional to a specifically generalizing visual culture, hinders any attempt at reduction to the concrete and more often than not annuls – given the factor of memory – the intentional, subjective, lyrical character of the latter. The mechanism of memory, on which these images always work in an exceptionally acute way, already tends of itself toward the disorganization of the concrete, toward idealization. (Dali 63)

As Onoff comes closer to the truth, so does the viewer. What was perceived as being "real" is exposed as false and the "truth" is revealed as something that will likely be taken with more than a little skepticism.

Onoff asks the Inspector if he may use the telephone, but because of the storm, the phone does not work. Onoff offers information about his trip to the country to concentrate on his work. Suddenly, the Inspector realizes that he did not recognize his idol because he had shaved his trademark beard. Onoff himself appears surprised when he touches his face and clearly has no memory of shaving his beard. In the bathroom, while he is changing into clean, dry clothes, Onoff examines his unfamiliar reflection and notices a spot of blood on his shirt. He attempts to destroy what he fears may be evidence by eating the piece of blood-stained fabric while an eye is shown to be watching him through the keyhole of the door. It is not likely that Onoff is fully cognizant of the reasons surrounding this damning evidence and again, his ignorance is the ignorance of the viewer. This identification serves to allow the viewer, when the mystery is revealed, to carry the message of the film into his own life, for "when fictional death is described to us, it is bequeathed by a given text through the operations of catharsis and artistic comprehension" (Stewart 20). Upon reentering the office, Onoff assumes that everything is now in order and that he can leave, since the Inspector has become so considerate and agreeable upon learning that he is a famous author. However, the Inspector apologizes but says he must stay a while longer. As the camera places the two men alternately in the extreme foreground, the sense of tension is heightened as is the theatricality and claustrophobic quality of the scene.

Again, the severe angle from which each character is shot is reminiscent of an Expressionist representation and further echoes the anxiety of the scene.

The Inspector asks Onoff to describe the details of the day before but Onoff sees this as an interrogation and begins to resume his hostile demeanor although he concedes to answering the Inspector's questions. These scenes are particularly indicative of Onoff's resistance against accepting the truth and facing his own death; he is afraid and these scenes depict the manifestation of his fear as aggression. During this initial leg of the interrogation, the first flashback sequence is shown as Onoff describes his day to the Inspector. However, his voiceover words do not match the images the viewer sees in the flashback. Either Onoff is lying or the flashback images are not extrapolated from his mind but rather serve as some unmediated truth for the viewer to which Onoff is not privy. In both cases, the ornery author has been characterized as an unreliable narrator and neither the Inspector nor the viewer can entirely trust his version of events. The deliberate blurring of this line is most evident during these flashback sequences and it ultimately calls Onoff's "reality" into question. Patrick Phillips places the notion of memory in cinema in very high regard and argues that the relationship between memory and cinema "is an important part of the mental experience of cinema." He suggests that the thoughts evoked in the viewer, prompted by the film, are able to integrate themselves into the film by means of our viewing experience (Phillips 148). For the viewer then, non-cinematic reality is called into question: as a character in the film, Onoff is not a real person, nor is he even an authentic character by virtue of his compromising position within the narrative. The events that he cannot remember have caused truth to become a tenuous goal both for

Onoff and the viewer. Until all is revealed at the close of the film, the viewer must accept the unreliability of memory, the mutability of perception, and ultimately, the inauthenticity of reality. Even when the nature of Onoff's existence is finally revealed, the notion that this may be somehow applicable to reality seems somewhat far-fetched. The supposition that there is an afterlife and the representation of this place on the screen is not bound by reason and it negates all rules of logic. Ultimately, the film's attempt to honestly address the implications of death and the sadness and loss that lingers even when life as it is known ends, evokes a decidedly haunted quality. As the line between memory and reality becomes increasingly blurred and Onoff must accept his fate, the living viewer is guided through the stages of loss along with the protagonist in an attempt to invoke an almost cathartic experience that might leave the viewer in a better position to cope with real issues of loss outside the film, and encourages the viewer to accept his own mortality.

When Onoff is unable to detail the events of the evening beyond 7 p.m., the Inspector becomes frustrated and takes a more hostile tone, as does Onoff. The Inspector demands that they begin again but Onoff refuses to continue until the Inspector explains his detainment. The Inspector admits that someone was murdered that evening not far from where Onoff was found wandering and Onoff becomes more compliant to the point that he begins to contradict his own testimony. Onoff's frame of mind is paralleled with the structure of the police station itself. It is an old, cavernous building in a state of complete disrepair, loaded with endless stacks of books and documents. Water now soaks the entire surface area of the floor as the officers make a completely futile attempt to bail water out of the building. As the power goes out and

the Inspector watches the other officers bring in the dead body, Onoff sees this as his opportunity to escape. When he becomes caught in an animal trap in the forest, the officers approach with flashlights and are able to subdue him. The symbolism of light is evident as Onoff remains in the dark, unable to comprehend the consequences of his actions.

In the next scene, Onoff is back at the station, stating his name for the Inspector as André types away. Again, Onoff comes to a point in his deposition where his words are not congruent with the images from the flashback. Part of this seems to be because he is withholding information from the Inspector but part of it seems to be because he is so disconnected from his own experience that he does not realize the truth. The narrative suggests that he has undergone some kind of trauma, adding to the air of mystery that pervades the film and contributing to the suspense for the benefit of the viewer. The flashback reveals Onoff in a frustrated and erratic state throughout the day and the Inspector becomes increasingly belligerent toward Onoff as he summarizes the inconsistencies of his deposition. The minimalist setting and the play between these two characters lend the viewer an ability to relate to the motivation of each man and his circumstances. In order to push Onoff further toward the truth, the Inspector quotes another passage from one of his novels that seems particularly appropriate for the situation.

INSPECTOR: "So as not to die of anguish or of shame, men are eternally condemned to forget the unpleasant moments of their lives. And the more unpleasant they are, the faster they're forgotten." The author of those lines must've done something very unpleasant indeed to make him forget his actions of just a few hours ago.

The use of close-up shots of the two men is prevalent and further lends to an emotional identification with the characters and their states of mind. Onoff decides at this point not to cooperate with the Inspector and refuses to answer his questions. As the Inspector hypothesizes about the potential victims, Onoff appears frazzled and the flashbacks become increasingly disjointed and confused. Onoff bursts into a giggling fit and the other officers beat him into silence. Following this, the Inspector seems mildly sympathetic as Onoff recites the story of his birth in the third-person. He reveals that his biography as Onoff is a fabrication and describes how an old man renamed him Onoff as he was growing up in an orphanage as Blaise February. He speaks of his past from a distance, as though he is watching the memories in his mind, again, not so much as a participant but rather as a viewer himself.

After he engages in a restless sleep, he awakens to return to the Inspector's office where he is shown photographs of people from his past. Onoff wonders where the Inspector found the pictures because he himself has been unable to find them. He begins to remember that he had been looking for these very photographs the night before and becomes completely absorbed by the memories the images evoke and immersed in the past. Again, his disconnection with the world in which he exists is accentuated as he seems to be at peace when perusing these old pictures from a past

long forgotten. The representation of photographs is used as a motif here, and in two of the other films to be discussed later. The pictures are used to prompt the construction of memories and evoke for the characters the emotions associated with loss. They represent that which is gone – people, experiences, moments to which we can never return. In this film specifically, the photographs foreshadow the finality of life; they serve as a tangible and concrete representation of an existence that decays over time.

When the Inspector informs Onoff that he has never dedicated a book to anyone in his life, Onoff is amazed and confused, but adamant that he dedicated his last book to the old man who gave him his name. The Inspector shows him a copy of the book and it bears no dedication whatsoever, which prompts Onoff to reveal that he submitted the work of the old man as his own and that this was the book he reconstructed from the old man's manuscripts. Onoff explains that he hates those who keep pushing him to write, because he feels he no longer has any creative energy in him. The Inspector asks if he killed his editor but Onoff maintains that he cannot remember although he confesses to looking for his gun. Again, the Inspector reveals the inconsistencies in his story, but this time is able to lead Onoff further through the flashback in which Onoff is promising to his friends that he will see them later that evening. The flashback cuts to Onoff frantically shaving his beard, writing a suicide note, and finally turning the gun on himself. The fast-paced violin tune from the very first scene resumes as the scene plays out and Onoff falls to the ground, blood all over his face while the rain pours. In the police station, the rain finally stops as the Inspector stands back to allow Onoff to absorb the realization that he had shot himself. Day begins to break and light enters the

room as André removes Onoff's handcuffs. He still wants to use the phone, but the woman at the other end cannot hear him; he is frustrated and searches the armoire for his recorded deposition but finds only blank pages. The entire scenario has been played out solely for his benefit, so that he may come to understand that he no longer belongs to the world of the living. Onoff realizes the ramifications of the events of the previous night and although he is tired and quite haggard in appearance, for the first time, he seems to be experiencing a sense of calm. The expression behind his eyes finally seems as though it belongs to this person; he is no longer disconnected from that which surrounds him.

Onoff appears meek and exhausted as he approaches the exit of the station and sees another man in a blue blanket being offered warm milk. The old man tells him that "nobody knows when they first come here" and Onoff understands that this is some kind of an in-between place where the once living enter the world of the dead and that this transition is a pure formality. The Inspector allows him to take his photographs as he boards a van to be taken elsewhere. While Onoff is unsure of what lies before him and although he is overcome with uncertainty and perhaps a sense of fear, the tone of the film is one of hope. As Stewart suggests in his arguments regarding death in prose fiction, in this film also, "death stands as a pivotal moment for language on the edge of silence, for evocation on the verge of the invisible, for narratabilty on the verge of closure" (Stewart 51). This once depressed and unfulfilled man is about to embark on a journey that the viewer cannot even imagine as a deeply affecting song fills the soundtrack and a shot of the vast, open countryside lies ahead.

A Pure Formality illustrates the resolve of one man to maintain a hold on his perceived existence. As the central character for whom the viewer feels pity and sympathy, Onoff is unable to distinguish his abrupt death from his unsatisfying life and is forced to undergo a psychological self-analysis in order to achieve a semblance of peace. While the staff at the station seem to be there to help him in the understanding of his life and death, ultimately, Onoff dies alone and must continue in his new existence alone. In relation to Thielicke's assertion that "death puts its distinctive stamp on human existence," the film suggests that only because of death does life acquire meaning. When Onoff can no longer deny his fate and can finally accept that his life is over, he is rewarded with the knowledge that he will not cease to exist. For the viewer, this wish-fulfilling device balances the darkness and discomfort that pervades the film until the final scenes and offers solace in the reverie that death need not be the end.

CHAPTER III: *JACOB'S LADDER*
Heaven is what you want it to be

Where *A Pure Formality* gains much of its emotional force through minimalism, *Jacob's Ladder* engages in a fairly intricate narrative scheme where nothing is as it seems and mysteries abound. However, although the setting of this film is not nearly as subtractive and claustrophobic as in *A Pure Formality*, the sense that the protagonist is trapped is certainly addressed throughout. Again, devices consistent with an Expressionist representation are invoked throughout the film, particularly regarding mise-en-scène. From the first opening shots of the film, the tone of *Jacob's Ladder* is presented as gloomy and dismal. The flashback scenes set in Vietnam are shot in dreary and subdued tones with a telephoto lens that flattens any depth that might be perceived. This lack of dimension serves to create a confined setting, even though the action takes place in the open air of a massive jungle. The characters are initially presented as fragmented, with the camera perceiving only pieces of body parts. The representation of arms and legs are depicted in sepia tones as intertitles inform the viewer that the setting is 1971 Vietnam, obviously an American platoon. The representation of death is almost immediate as chaos seems to erupt and the soldiers in the platoon all start dropping from strange, intense, instant headaches. Their faces are distorted with pain and one soldier is watching it all, crying, looking horrified and deeply affected. The scene closes as the protagonist, Jacob Singer, is wounded in the stomach with a bayonet. As the viewer is momentarily persuaded to suppose that Jacob will die, a sense of shock regarding an abstract, tragic loss is for the first time introduced into the film.

The narrative force driving *Jacob's Ladder* is that of, in a broad sense, tragedy. However, the film is further haunted by a profound sense of loss and the pain associated with that loss. Most narrative films of the Hollywood variety offer the viewer a relatively neat and organized chronology of events and state their purpose, leaving few questions unanswered. Any unresolved issues are glossed over, barely noticeable to the inaugurated viewer. In *Jacob's Ladder*, the narrator's reliability is called into question as it becomes apparent that he has suffered some sort of mental debilitation, flashbacks and dream sequences are favoured, and the film's conclusion lacks a typical kind of authentic resolution. As the narrative progresses in its episodic structure, so does life – at least Jacob's life – and a clear statement is made regarding the narrativization of human experience. As Jacob Singer struggles with a present that is possibly being fabricated, the viewer struggles with the notion of accepting the inauthenticity of the protagonist's experiences and the ultimate false resolution surrounding his experiences in Vietnam before he dies on the operating table. The protagonist's story is one that transcends the film's own plot mechanisms and resides in an almost spiritual space where only sadness and sorrow dwell. This is the world in which Jacob Singer lives, and this is the world in which attention deserves to be focused. The film systematically presents his life as one in which loss is the theme and the viewer is guided through each of these overwhelming ordeals as they are revisited so that Jacob is perceived as the epitome of despair and sadness.

The film is saturated with images of dark, deserted streets, images that depict emptiness and loneliness and its intent to foreground the theme of loss is swift and powerful. The first explicit instance in which the viewer is made aware of an

experience that Jacob has with loss comes immediately after he is attacked with the bayonet. He is jolted awake in a subway seat after what now seems to have been a flashback. As he regains his composure, he is unaware as to whether he has missed his stop, so he decides to get off at the next stop but cannot find his way to street level. He is met only with locked gates, even though it appears he is at the correct stop. Light bulbs flicker as he attempts to cross the tracks and he narrowly escapes being hit by an oncoming train in which passengers press their hands and faces against the windows. Again the scene is wrought with an overpowering sense of doom and despair, mirroring Jacob's own emotional state. He has succumbed to an aimless existence and the world around him is strange and unfamiliar. Because he is unable to cope with his experiences in Vietnam, by which he is still clearly haunted, he is incapable of pursuing a meaningful life in the context of the present. He has lost any sense of direction associated with the linear progression of time regarding human existence and as the narrative continues, it becomes clear that he has lost his innocence as a result of the trauma he experienced while he served in Vietnam. Jacob serves as the personification of loss and sadness, having suffered a loss of optimism and innocence, he has himself become lost. While Jacob's experience on the train remains firmly grounded in the film narrative, the viewer can recognize the feelings associated with allowing events and circumstances to lead one through life at times rather than taking control of a situation and determining one's own fate. As it becomes apparent that Jacob is a misplaced soul, highly affective imagery of darkness and desolation in the underground subway system and close-up shots of Jacob's distressed visage persuade

the viewer to identify with the protagonist's emotional state and to relate to his loss of control.

Jacob faces issues of loss throughout many aspects of his life. His loss of direction in life had likely begun to take an effect on him even prior to his experiences in Vietnam with the death of his young son. Following the subway scene where Jacob is lost and afraid, he travels the alleys of New York as it is presented in dark, sepia tones with a clear absence of nature and the foregrounding of a dirty, industrial cityscape. Here, the public spaces and streets are again reminiscent of Expressionism, where the focus is on human psychology, things not being what they seem, and themes of stylization and distortion are echoed in the mise-en-scene. Jacob returns in the morning after a double shift at the post office to a somewhat small and dingy apartment that he shares with his girlfriend Jezzie (Jezebel). She is presented as an emotionally distant companion to Jacob, concerned more with what he can give her than with helping him heal the wounds that continue to cause him pain. As Jacob sleeps, images of Vietnam return to him in his nightmares and he is jolted awake while Jezzie is readying herself for the day. She tells him that one of his sons stopped by with some old pictures that his ex-wife was going to throw away. Jezzie clearly holds the children in no regard, forgetting their Biblical names (Jed and Eli) and is obviously disinterested in Jacob's past life. Jake comes across a picture of a third son, who died before Jacob went to Vietnam. As in *A Pure Formality*, the photograph motif is used to represent the finality of life in this world; the pictures have been discarded and forgotten, thrown absentmindedly into a nondescript envelope. The child in this last photograph, Gabe, later becomes for Jacob a guide to leaving the past behind and gaining a sense of peace,

an explicit symbol of the Angel Gabriel, who led the Virgin Mary toward her own destiny.

Jacob is taken aback by the photo of his dead son and begins to weep, which prompts Jezzie to take the paper bag and throw all the other photos in the incinerator. The picture reminds Jacob of perhaps the most significant loss he has ever experienced in his life, the loss of his child. The emotional trauma he is reliving by caressing the picture and weeping openly in the dim apartment is not hidden from the viewer, nor is it embedded with some kind of glimmer of hope in order to make the scene more bearable. It is heart wrenching as the camera tracks closer toward Jacob's face and offers no option to the viewer but to absorb the emotional toll of a man whose life is becoming characterized by a condition of profound sadness.

Perhaps due to the loss of his son and the trauma of his experiences in Vietnam, Jacob is also faced with a loss of purpose. The notion that life has become a tedious, monotonous routine devoid of meaning is most clearly illustrated in a number of sessions with Louis, Jacob's chiropractor and friend. Louis acts as another guide for Jacob, helping him reach an inner peace and as a confidant who has witnessed the emotional and intellectual deterioration of a man who once had it all. The viewer is introduced to Louis when Jacob leaves work early due to a sore back, a persistent problem that is clearly a physical manifestation of an emotional and spiritual problem. During his adjustment, Jacob has another flashback that seems to be noticed by Louis, who is framed with white backlight and wearing a white lab coat.

JACOB: You know, you look like an angel, Louis . . .
You're a lifesaver Louis.
LOUIS: I know.

The viewer learns that Jacob has a PhD in philosophy and chooses to work at the post office rather than pursue a vocation in academia.

JACOB: After 'Nam, I didn't want to think anymore.

Jacob resists integration into a world without his wife and children, especially without his dead son. He is plagued by the past and is unable to exist in the present; his inability to reconcile the horrific nature of his experiences has only perpetuated the recurring theme of loss that can be said to characterize his life. Where *A Pure Formality* encourages the viewer to identify with the emotions of fear and anxiety associated with facing death, *Jacob's Ladder* attempts to elicit the emotions of grief and hopelessness associated with the loss of life. Onoff is led toward a new existence after death; the goal of the film is to have him "processed" at the station and to have him move on to the next phase. However, Jacob Singer's case is different in that the focus is not so much on moving him into the next phase or even in confronting death; rather, the objective of the film is to have this character reconcile the emotions associated with the fragility, unpredictability, and finality of life. The narrative machine, then, functions on a slightly different level here; the use of flashbacks, flashforwards, hallucinations, and memories serve to foreground the mutable and unreliable nature of existence. What has been depicted as Jacob's life has, in fact, been his death. The film operates on the emotional level of loss and sadness rather than fear and anxiety, although these elements are certainly present in the film. The fact that Jacob's body is still in the hospital and he is arguably alive until the end of the film

serves to foreground the need to accept mortality and the loss of life, which is positioned as one small step before facing death.

On his way home from Louis's, a car starts chasing Jacob down a narrow bridge walking path when a stranger warns him, "Look out!" As the car passes, ominous faces peer through the windows and one of the passengers' heads starts to shake violently. As Jacob begins to feel the increased intensity of his flashbacks and hallucinations, he decides to seek help from the medical profession. He had previously been a patient of a doctor specializing in the psychological treatment of war veterans but has not been to see him in some time. Jacob asks the nurse to make an appointment immediately with Dr. Carlson, but the nurse finds no record of him, nor does she find any record of Jacob Singer as a patient, even though he maintains that he has been coming to the clinic for years. As the nurse bends down to pick up a piece of paper, her hat falls off and Jacob is horrified to see a disgusting growth on her head. Again, the tone of this setting and the mise-en-scène from shot to shot invoke an Expressionist representation. Not only is the hospital colourless, lifeless, and dismal, but there is a sense of doom and futility about Jacob's attempt to seek help. While the hospital is somewhat similar to the police station in *A Pure Formality*, it is more explicitly reminiscent of the asylum in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, invoking a distrust in the establishment and a fear of what is represented as the civilized world. Further, the film has established a realist setting into which nightmarish scenes such as this one are injected, lending itself to moments of surrealist representation, where "the concept of the irrational juxtaposition of objects" is illustrated (Gould 24). Objects such as the mysterious car and elements such as the vibrating heads prompt the viewer to question

the significance of these things in relation to the narrative. They do not seem to belong, so what are they doing in the film?

Jacob runs through the halls trying to find Dr. Carlson's office and barges into a group therapy session of some sort where the counselor informs him that Dr. Carlson died in a car explosion about a month earlier. Jacob is distressed and leaves the clinic without the solace he was seeking. That night, he tells Jezzie that weird things have been happening and that he feels as though he is being chased by demons. He thinks the people in the car were trying to kill him; he finds it strange that the subway gates were all locked. His world is slowly becoming a more hopeless and even grotesque place that he cannot comprehend. Jezzie offers reasonable explanations about "freaks in New York" and tries to diminish the severity of Jake's feelings. Yet there remains a profound sadness about the way in which Jacob moves around in the world. The film foregrounds his inability to cope with terrible losses and even as he attempts to search for help and comfort, he is faced with the loss of support. Dr. Carlson is unavailable to him and the clinic in which he seeks refuge is simply an extension of the horrors Jacob continues to face in the world to which he has returned from Vietnam; it is a world that he cannot accept.

Images of the grotesque surround Jacob as his hallucinations persist. The nurse from the clinic, with the unsightly growth on her head, the heads of strangers that stare and shake violently, as well as the setting in which he exists; Jacob is enclosed in a gloomy industrial world, with a noticeable absence of light, colour, and comfort. Another instance in which Jacob is assaulted by horrific images and is faced with an almost claustrophobic loss of control is the scene where he and Jezzie attend a house

party. Wandering into the host's fridge, Jacob sees some kind of an animal head in plastic wrap and is taken aback by the strange object. Jacob and the viewer suspect something is not quite right about this image and as he walks through the house aimlessly and uncomfortably, the viewer is truly in Jacob's shoes; the atmosphere is overwhelming, the air is tight, the mood is uncomfortable and uninviting. A fortune-teller reads Jacob's palm and tells him that he is actually dead, according to his lifeline. She offers him this piece of information in a light manner, but she seems very serious about the facts. Jacob goes on to dance with Jezzie and as the lights flicker and strobe, he begins to feel even more uncomfortable; he sees a man in black whose head changes shape and begins to shake violently back and forth as did the passenger from the car. Crows and ugly looking birds enter and start circling when Jacob sees Jezzie as a monster and images of a serpent persist. Jacob falls down in a frenzy and flashes to Vietnam, where men are commenting over a dead body. While the circumstances seem to indicate that Jacob is losing his mind, that he is the one whose perception cannot be trusted by the viewer, his reaction to these events evokes a sense of pity and understanding. As the narrative progresses, the viewer learns that Jacob was once a happy man, with a loving family and fulfilling and promising career. Even in Vietnam he acted as the cornerstone of the platoon's morale and emotional well-being. This information is contrasted with Jacob's irrational behaviour in the present and the viewer cannot truly reconcile the authentic characterization of a peaceful, gentle, and intelligent man with such an unstable and volatile state of mind. As well, these images of serpents and shaking heads are so disturbing, for Jacob and therefore for the viewer, that they are difficult to dismiss as hallucinations. The viewer wants to trust Jacob's

judgement because he has been presented as real and honest; his feelings and emotions have not been hidden or masked. As Jacob's horrified and fearful face fills the frame and he attempts to keep the vicious birds away from him while the music continues to play and the lights continue to flicker, the viewer cannot help but regard this protagonist as pathetic. Of course he cannot carry on as though things are normal and his life is fine, he has lost his child and family as well as his own sense of self-worth and purpose.

As Jacob becomes further entrenched in the horror of his hallucinations, he begins to perceive clues and hints about the nature of his present existence. It becomes clear that Jacob's only relief from the life he is living comes from the flashbacks of his past life with Sarah and the boys and from inventing scenarios in which the present is nothing more than an all too real nightmare. After the party where Jacob makes a scene, Jezzie is upset with him because his behaviour was embarrassing. He begins to look pale and ill and she takes his temperature and finds he has a severe fever. Jezzie knocks on all the doors of her neighbours to find enough ice to fill the tub and everyone on the floor of their apartment building tries to get Jacob into an ice bath to bring down the fever. Jacob feels violated and is obviously confused as he yells, "Stop it! You're killing me!" In the next scene, he is in bed with Sarah and complains that it is cold, so he gets up to close the window and Sarah says, "It's not healthy when it's closed." Jacob proceeds to tell her about a dream he had where he describes living with Jezzie; he says it was a nightmare and that he was burning from ice. Gabe, the dead son, comes in and asks to be tucked in by Daddy. Jacob takes Gabe to his room and tucks him in while the two sing "Sonny Boy." The scene is one of idyllic family

life and as Jake leaves the room, one of the boys says, "I love you dad." Jacob cannot release himself from the life he used to know because it is from this life that he will be able to regain a sense of meaning and purpose that he can take with him on his journey. Jacob takes a last, loving look at the boys and gets back into bed with Sarah, where he tells her he loves her.

The next shot is of blue skies through rustling trees with the sun piercing through; the camera circles overhead, down to Jacob, whose eyes are flickering open – they are red and he looks scared and disoriented. He is in the tub, under water, with a doctor commenting on his condition and Jezzie looking on. A tear streams down his face as Jacob realizes that this is not the nightmare, but that this is his life. The next morning, Jezzie tells Jacob about their rough night and informs him that he was talking to Sarah and the boys, "even the dead one." Jacob asks if he is dead and Jezzie tells him he is not dead, that he'll be okay but that he needs rest. She leaves and Jacob sobs, obviously in profound agony. Again, the film makes no apologies for its forthrightness and its severity. Jacob is afraid to let go of life, one life that he yearns to be the truth and one life that seems to only cause him pain and suffering. But even though the flashbacks and hallucinations are becoming increasingly unbearable, Jacob is still afraid to accept his fate at this point. As the climax of the film approaches and the viewer regards the narrative retrospectively, it becomes apparent that a specific narrative machine is being applied to the process of death and dying. Jacob's fate is about to be revealed and each of these events that force him to face a seemingly insurmountable loss lead to one specific point; Jacob is being given the opportunity to come to terms with the fact that he must let go of his life.

As the events of one particular night in Vietnam become increasingly suspicious and Jacob becomes convinced that he has been the victim of some government conspiracy, he accepts a meeting with a former platoon-mate. Paul expresses to Jacob the same feelings of paranoia and fear and as the two men seem to have gained a sense of peace in talking about this common dilemma, Paul is killed in a car explosion right in front of Jacob. Later, Jacob meets with the surviving members of the platoon at Paul's funeral and the men agree to enlist the help of a lawyer to try and find out what the military may be hiding. However, Jacob is denied closure when the other men mysteriously decide against the action. Ultimately, the lawyer informs Jacob that after some background checking, he has discovered that he and the others were lying and that they were not even in Vietnam. As Jacob attempts to absorb this unbelievable outcome in front of the law courts, two men forcibly pull him into a car where he is threatened against pursuing any further investigation of the events of that night in Vietnam. Jacob fights back and is thrown out of the car when a man dressed as Santa steals his wallet. In the next scene, it seems that Jacob has somehow found his way into a hospital where he asks for Louis. The hospital is a decrepit building with all sorts of mental patients. It is dirty and grimy and he sees Gabe's bicycle and calls out for his son. This is perhaps the most pronounced use of Expressionist techniques, where the distortion and stylization reach the level of the grotesque. The stretcher passes over limbs on the floor, blood on the walls, the figure of the shaking head returns yet again. Jacob is being strapped into some kind of contraption that leaves his head in a metal mechanism. He sees Jezzie dressed as one of the nurses and asks her to get him out of here.

DOCTOR: Where do you want to go?
JAKE: Home.
DOCTOR: This is your home. You're dead.
JAKE: Dead? No, I just hurt my back. I'm not dead.
DOCTOR: What are you then?
JAKE: I'm alive!
DOCTOR: Then what are you doing here?
JAKE: I don't know. This isn't happening!
DOCTOR: What *is* happening?
JAKE: Get me out of here!
DOCTOR: There is no out of here. You've been killed. Don't you remember?

A person with no eyes drills a large needle in between Jacob's eyes as he screams and a shot of the sky through the trees again reappears. The camera moves down and the next shot is of Jacob in the hospital and Sarah and the boys have come to visit him. He repeats, "I'm not dead. I'm alive. I'm not dead." Sarah tells him that he just hurt his back and that he will be fine. The boys joke with him.

SARAH: Oh Jacob. I still love you. Whatever that's worth.

A faceless voice from beside Jacob coldly says: "Dream on" and Jacob starts crying as he realizes that this visit is actually a hallucination and that Sarah has not come to see him. He asks Sarah to help him and she is kind, consoling, and affectionate.

Louis arrives looking for Jacob and busts him out of the hospital and takes him to his soothing office, where he is again in his "angelic" white lab coat.

LOUIS: Well you've done it to yourself this time, haven't you?
JAKE: I was in hell. I don't want to die, Louis.
LOUIS: Well I'll see what I can do about it.
JAKE: It's all pain . . .

Louis quotes Eckhart, who "saw hell, too," as saying that "the only part of you that burns in hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life, your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they're not punishing you, he said. They're freeing your soul. So the way he sees it, if you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth. It's just a matter of how you look at it.". Louis continues to adjust Jake's broken body and the soundtrack music is almost inspirational as Jacob attempts to get up from the chiropractor's bench.

LOUIS: I want to see if you can stand.
JACOB: By myself?
LOUIS: You can do it.

Jacob does get up and stand on his own, seemingly cured of whatever ailment he suffered. The next shot is Jacob in his apartment with his back to the camera, his face shown as a reflection in the mirror as he goes through old army paraphernalia in a keepsake box. The viewer learns through a flashback that Gabe was run over by a car while tending to his bicycle in the street, the same bicycle that Jacob saw in the decrepit hospital. Jacob appears to have witnessed the whole thing and is clearly haunted by the images of his son's death that are represented in these hallucinations.

These last two scenes prepare both Jacob and the viewer for the revelation that is to come – that Jacob is actually dying on a military stretcher in Vietnam. He will not survive the bayonet wound and the film has been a projection into a future that might have existed had Jacob lived. However, this journey seems to have offered Jacob a sense of closure as well, in the explanation of what happened that fateful night. As Jacob peruses the keepsake box and experiences yet another horrific hallucination, the

phone rings and Jacob takes the call from a man who claims to be a chemist with knowledge of experiments conducted in Vietnam. Jezzie asks Jacob not to go; she has served as an obstacle in Jacob's search for truth and peace. However, Jacob meets Michael Newman, the chemist, who is the same man who warned Jacob during the two attacks on his life. They walk through an area of the city where images of dilapidated buildings and decay are prevalent; the film exists in a dirty world. Michael describes the experiments he was persuaded to conduct – creating chemical drugs that would induce anger instincts in soldiers and make them more violent, therefore more successful in fighting the "enemy." Michael describes to Jacob the testing of The Ladder (as the drug was called) on monkeys, then on Vietnamese POWs and he is visibly distressed as he recalls the effects of the drug. Then Michael tells Jacob that his unit was the first test group, but they didn't fight the Vietnamese, they killed one another; this is what happened the night that none of the men could remember.

MICHAEL: You tore each other to pieces. I knew it would happen. I told them!

Jacob has a flash of that night, a man shooting indiscriminately with rage in his eyes.

MICHAEL: I needed to find you. I felt responsible. The Ladder was my baby.

Jacob catches a cab as the rain pours in the night and he notices a rosary hanging from the rearview mirror. The flashback continues as Jacob remembers being wounded in the stomach by a bayonet, looking into the eyes of his attacker with utter amazement and sadness. Back in the cab, the rosary continues to jingle, as if to signify the end of the tale. But Jacob continues toward his destination in order to face his destiny and reconcile the loss of his life. He goes to an upscale building where the doorman

addresses him as Dr. Singer. Jacob stands in the interior of a dark suite and calls for Sarah, Jed, and Eli, but the apartment appears empty. He sees homework and leftover dessert on the kitchen table and he looks at pictures on the piano as the rain continues to fall outside. He sits on a sofa and has home movie-like flashes of his family life with Sarah and the boys and dozes off to sleep. He wakes in the same room as light pours in through the windows and as he gets up and moves to the doorway, he sees Gabe playing at the bottom of a grand staircase.

JACOB: Gabe?
GABE: Hi Dad!

As Jacob realizes that he is really seeing his son, he smiles and for the first time in the film, he looks truly happy. He sits next to Gabe and lays his head in the boy's lap as the child comforts him.

GABE: It's okay. Come on. Let's go up.
Come on.

They climb the stairs toward an increasingly brighter light, hand in hand and as they reach the top, the frame is engulfed with white light. Unlike Onoff, Jacob is not required to make the journey alone, and he seems happy to be with his son again. This afterlife is not a place to fear, nor is it a place to move reluctantly toward; Jacob welcomes the upcoming journey and has happily left his life behind, at least in his mind. In the next shot, the setting appears to be an operating room in an army hospital where Jacob is dying.

DOCTOR: He's gone. He looks kind of peaceful,
the guy. He put up a hell of a fight, though.

It becomes clear that Jacob has actually died in Vietnam and that the entire film has not been a series of events that were actually happening, but something else, a lesson for him to learn before he could relinquish life and reconcile his own death. The camera tracks back as the entire operating room fills the frame and Al Jolsen sings "Sonny Boy." A cut to a black and white still frame of Jacob and Gabe walking their bicycles with their backs to the camera, casts the viewer from the context and disengages further participation.

> We see life vanish but we express this fact
> by the use of a special language: it is the
> soul, we say, which departs for another world
> where it will join its forefathers. (Hertz 27)

The message has been sent: Jacob's unwillingness to let go of a life that is no longer his hinders his spiritual progress. Whether the existence of an afterlife is accepted by the viewer or not, the emotions associated with the various losses Jacob encounters are not only presented as genuine, but as containing a certain sense of psychological validity. The narrative is therefore embedded with a thread of authenticity and the viewer is positioned as a foil to the protagonist, both coping with feelings of loss. Ultimately, death becomes the mechanism by which these feelings are explored and Jacob's sense of loss is reconciled with the knowledge he has gained by the end of the film: although life is fragile, it is subject to interpretation and is never actually finished.

CHAPTER IV: *THE SIXTH SENSE*
Learning to let go . . . of life and of innocence

Narrative fiction films, especially those of the Hollywood variety, tend to employ a number of devices designed to thrill the viewer in some deliberate manner. As it happens, the grave mood that hovers throughout M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* is often the backdrop for a number of cinematic bait-and-switch maneuvers common to North American media culture. The film tends to focus on action, events, and plot development in order to impress the viewer with its showmanship and the gravity of the subject is sometimes at risk of being outdone by the game that inevitably ensues between the film and the viewer. A number of films that could be characterized as fitting into the mystery or thriller genre, including *The Sixth Sense*, draw the viewer's attention away from the main climax of the film (in the case of *The Sixth Sense*, that the main character is actually dead) by providing interesting and engaging subplots, and having events serve as pieces to a puzzle. When the revelation is made, or the mystery solved, the films take on a game-like quality, where any emotional or philosophical aspects of the narrative take a back seat to the viewer's need to replay the film in his mind to see if all the pieces fit together. This concentration on the main climax is primarily achieved through a devotion to plot development rather than character development. The viewer is drawn into the events that unfold in each film that will, presumably, answer questions within the plot. Many contemporary North American films are free from religious specificity and tend to normalize death and the unknown, again, for the purpose of audience buy-in. The narrative deliberately glosses over the severity and gravity of circumstances and reduces the notions of death and

loss to innovative plot devices. While these tendencies are certainly not absent from *The Sixth Sense*, such antics are not representative of the true nature of a film that addresses the issue of death and its consequences in a forthright and unabashed manner.

The Sixth Sense employs a fairly linear narrative structure with only a few flashbacks that aid the viewer in piecing events together, particularly at the climax of the film. The notion of death is used as the mechanism by which the experiences of the two protagonists are paralleled; Cole Sear, a nine-year-old boy is plagued with apparitions of the dead, while Malcolm Crowe has unknowingly sought the boy out for help crossing over to the Other Side. Like Jacob Singer, both Cole and Malcolm have experienced the loss of a particular loved one and subsequently, the loss of the safe and comforting family unit. The emotions associated with this kind of profound loss are equated to the loss of a life in both *The Sixth Sense* and in *Jacob's Ladder*. Without the normalcy of the familiar, a new life must be forged and each of these films compares the effort to reestablish a new existence in the face of great loss to embarking on the afterlife as a result of death. The mood of *The Sixth Sense* is certainly grim, with oppressive architecture and low-key lighting serving to create a sad and dismal ambience characteristic of Expressionism, not unlike that in *Jacob's Ladder*. However, as in the aforementioned film, it is the emotional state of the protagonist and the exploration of his psychological state that gives the film its force and allows for an almost cathartic experience in the viewer, one that allows the viewer to be positioned parallel to the protagonist who faces death as a first-hand experience. *The Sixth Sense* opens in darkness, while an orchestral soundtrack plays as opening credits roll; the

music contains an air of mystery and a mood of uneasiness persists. A barely glowing light bulb is foregrounded in the first frame as a woman walks into a dark cellar to get a bottle of wine and she shivers from the cold. She goes upstairs to her husband, Dr. Malcolm Crowe, as they celebrate his receiving an award for excellence in child psychology in front of a cozy fire. Even as she expresses her pride in this recognition and notes the sacrifices her husband has made for his work with troubled children, an aura of doom surrounds the couple. Tragedy is foreshadowed using almost Expressionistic techniques, such as the continued use of low-key lighting and particularly during a deliberate shift in the camera's perspective from a direct shot of the couple to a shot of their obscured reflection in the brass plaque. On a more thematic level, the film's preoccupation with the notion of loss is introduced using Malcolm's profession.

> ANNA: You have a gift that teaches children to be strong in situations where most adults would piss on themselves.

Similar to *Jacob's Ladder*, the film derives an emotional force from its concentration on various instances in which the protagonists experience feelings of profound loss. As with Jacob Singer, the viewer is introduced to Malcolm Crowe only shortly before a traumatic event. As he and his wife, Anna, continue to celebrate, the wine begins to take an effect on them and the couple goes upstairs as they playfully begin to disrobe. Anna notices that the window to the bedroom has been broken and that the phone is lying on the floor, off the hook. She screams as she sees a shadow pass in the bathroom and the figure is quickly identified as a man in only his underwear. The initial foreshadowing has been realized as the viewer becomes aware that Malcolm and

Anna are in peril. The unfolding of a tragic event becomes inevitable as the grim setting finally seems congruent with the circumstances of the narrative.

Malcolm tries to reason with him when the man claims to have been a patient of his as a child. It is clear that he bears a strong resentment toward Malcolm and blames Malcolm for not helping him as he had promised. Malcolm places the man as Vincent Grey and the man screams and cries as he tells Malcolm: "You failed me." Malcolm is clearly distressed by this revelation and his obvious feelings of guilt resound as he asks that Vincent give him another chance to try to help him. Malcolm is visibly shocked when Vincent turns his back on him, reaches for a gun, and abruptly shoots Malcolm in the stomach. Despairingly, Vincent turns the gun on himself as Malcolm falls back on the bed. The film is adamant in its portrayal of this first penetrating example of loss; as Malcolm's wounded body is centered on the bed, filling the frame, Anna weeps over her husband before the shot fades to black.

When Malcolm first encounters Cole, the two both seem to emit an aura of sadness and detachment from their physical surroundings. Malcolm moves through space unaware, despite his astute observations about the boy and his knowledge of child psychology. Like the viewer, Malcolm is lost; he believes he is actively involved in his quest to help Cole when, in fact, he is simply being guided through a series of events whose purpose is not yet clear. Malcolm is not connected to the world around him; rather, he is a product of his circumstances and like Jacob Singer, he has become the personification of sadness and loss that can be seen in his oblique involvement with his surroundings. He first meets Cole on a Philadelphia street where the boy rushes to

enter a church. As he follows Cole into the building, he finds the boy playing in the pews with figurine soldiers, reciting dialogue in Latin.

> MALCOLM: We were supposed to meet today, but
> I missed our appointment. I'm sorry.
> You know, in the olden days in Europe,
> people used to hide out in churches.
> They would claim sanctuary.
> COLE: What were they hiding from?
> MALCOLM: Bad people, mostly. People that wanted to
> put them in jail, hurt them.

Cole wears his father's oversized eyeglasses that contain no lenses, the viewer's first clue to the boy's own personal loss. This feeling of loss is repeated throughout the film and it is the one common denominator between Cole and Malcolm. Elisabeth Bronfen describes the function of such repetition as a rhetorical strategy that serves two purposes.

> Thus repetition articulates loss not only by enacting a *lost object* in the midst of difference, but also in the sense that the first repeated term refers to something that is, as Rimmon-Kenan notes, "not univocally a 'presence' but also, quite possibly, an 'absence.'" Repetition is, then, a duplicitous rhetorical strategy, for what it enacts lies in the past. It is also quite different from – in fact quite possibly the first representation of – the original lost term. Thus repetition is also informed with novelty. (Bronfen 105)

The two characters each exhibit a grave quality that goes beyond mere malaise or even depression; they share a common pain due to loss and are disembodied souls whose paths have crossed, as the viewer might surmise, for a reason.

As Malcolm walks home in the dark and returns to a single plate of dinner on the table, the sense of dislocation is heightened. For whatever reason, Malcolm and

Anna no longer share the closeness presented at the beginning of the film. His detachment is accentuated when he is led to more remote physical spaces; Malcolm is unable to exist in the world as a free agent but is subtly, although deliberately moved to specific areas and through specific circumstances. While Anna is asleep in bed, Malcolm goes to turn a red doorknob but he is not permitted entry because the door is locked. He goes to the wine cellar to work on Cole's case and translates the boy's mutterings in Latin as, "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord." Pictured in this dark and dingy corner of the house, Malcolm's position in the world becomes further defined: he is coping with loss and in attaching himself to the narrative of this young boy, he is embarking on a search for purpose and meaning. His experience with death, or the brush with death as it has been characterized thus far, serves as the vehicle by which Malcolm will examine his own existence and discover the nature of mortality.

While the loss of purpose, direction, and hope is most pronounced in the character of Malcolm Crowe, particularly represented in his tense relationship with his wife, the theme of loss is ultimately articulated as a common thread that links the three central characters. Cole is clearly affected by the loss of his father in a profound way. In order to maintain a sense of connection and closeness to the absent figure, Cole wears his father's glasses and watch, even though they serve no purpose for him. The setting in this film also invokes the ominous quality associated with Expressionism. Even the daytime scenes are shot in dull and muted tones save for the colour red, which serves as both a foreshadowing device and a symbol of mortality that evokes a sense of anxiety and uneasiness. The colour red appears when death is near, creating tension and apprehension in both the protagonists and the viewer. This is also a motif

reminiscent of surrealist representations, particularly in terms of Gould's comments on *Blood and Sand* (1941), where he notes an attention to a similar use of the device. As in that film, *The Sixth Sense* uses the colour red symbolically, "but it simultaneously is used *emotionally*, and also acts upon the spectator as a visual stimulus" (Gould 40-41). In one scene, when Cole arrives at school by himself, he hesitates to enter the large, red, oppressive building. Autumn leaves fly around him and the coldness goes beyond the brisk temperature associated with the season; the mood is uneasy. Again, the film conveys Cole's loneliness and detachment through mise-en-scène and symbolism. As a child who cannot fit into the society of which he is a part, Cole clings to an idea in the hope of gaining a sense of comfort while at the same time, distances himself from the one person who he can truly trust. Cole's mother, Lynn, is now single and must work in order to support herself and her child. While the woman clearly loves her son, she is incapable of providing for him the security and solace he so desperately needs in the face of horrific circumstances. The nature of their relationship is one of distance and detachment, despite the genuine love they share. Cole is afraid to confide in his mother and she is unable to break through his silence. The boy exhibits an almost unnatural level of maturity in his resolve to "take care" of his mother by not allowing her into his world of alienation, difference, and horror, even though she so desperately wants to feel a connection to him. Yet he still maintains the innocence of a child who longs to please his mother and this paradoxical behaviour is displayed simultaneously in a number of scenes, the first of which takes place in the kitchen of their home. Cole's mother is readying herself for the day and goes into the kitchen where all the cupboards and drawers are open. She appears only slightly perplexed by the unusual

sight but simply closes them as Cole sits down to breakfast and she goes to get him a clean shirt. When Lynn returns only seconds later, she is alarmed, as is the viewer, to find all the cupboards and drawers open again. While Cole worries that she may be thinking ill of him and Lynn reassures him of her love, the viewer is left with a sense that the mother and son are surrounded by an ominous presence, particularly when Lynn notices that he has left a sweaty palm print on the table. While the narrative explains this presence as Cole's ability to see the dead, it can be interpreted as the overwhelming sense of loss that pervades this loving, though detached relationship. This detachment is quickly punctuated again as Cole leaves for school with a boy who Cole pays to appear as his friend. He does this for his mother's benefit, so that she can be comforted by the knowledge that her son is not alone or feeling alienated. The loss of the family unit has affected them both and neither of them is quite able to reconcile their circumstances and move beyond the sadness because it would require an emotional reckoning for which neither has the strength at this point in the film.

Lynn and Malcolm sit silently in the front room of her house as Cole returns home from school. The tension is obvious and the sense of detachment is again punctuated. Although the film offers a narrative explanation for their behaviour (Malcolm is dead and therefore Lynn cannot see him), the absence of conversation and the uneasiness each of them exhibit is congruent to the manner in which each of them interacts with people in general; at a birthday party, Lynn is unable to make any kind of connection with other parents and is singled out as an oddity and Malcolm cannot maintain a connection with his wife. Cole and Lynn exchange fantasies about the day that has almost passed and both of them seem to ignore Malcolm. When Lynn leaves

the room, Cole approaches Malcolm, but he hesitates to speak. Malcolm is pleasant in his persuasion to engage Cole in a conversation. Cole eyes the kitchen where his mother is making triangle pancakes in honour of his "winning a grand slam at school and being praised by the other students." He is wearing the oversized watch that belonged to his father, although it no longer works. Cole begins to see the possibility that he may not have to face the terrors to which he is subjected alone. While he is still unsure as to whether or not Malcolm is the answer to his problems, he begins to trust the psychologist and slowly starts to allow Malcolm into some of the more personal areas of his life. In the front room, Cole reveals to Malcolm that he once upset his mother and teachers with a drawing depicting a man stabbing another man in the neck with a screwdriver. The boy displays his unusual level of understanding and perception when he states that now he draws pictures of smiling faces and dogs and rainbows because "they don't have meetings about rainbows." Malcolm has experienced guilt associated with the loss of Vincent Grey and Cole is coping with the loss of his father and family unit; by confiding in Malcolm, Cole has set the healing process in motion for both of them.

Until the point at which the film reveals its "secret," it remains extremely focused on developing the emotional characterization of both Malcolm and Cole. Scenes alternate almost equally between the two protagonists and are interrupted only by shared moments between them, as in the front room where Cole begins to trust Malcolm. However, the attention to their individual circumstances must continue in order for the climax of the film to be fully realized. The most poignant aspect of Malcolm's sadness and loneliness is evidenced in his interaction, or lack thereof, with

his wife, Anna. The formerly loving couple now consists of two separate people who cannot connect, leaving each of them alienated. When Malcolm arrives late to an anniversary dinner with his wife and tries to apologize, she ignores him. He attempts to engage her in conversation and perhaps help her understand his need to help Cole by telling her about the similarity between Cole and Vincent. He goes on to hypothesize about possible abuse the child may be facing while Anna continues to ignore him. She gets the bill as Malcolm tries to apologize again and to explain that he feels like he has been given a second chance, but Anna abruptly stands and says "Happy Anniversary" before she leaves Malcolm sitting alone at the table. Malcolm moves around in an almost transient state, as though he is living in between one life and another. Although the film defines his existence as exactly this, the sadness associated with loss is so highly pronounced that Malcolm serves to personify the emotional weight of such circumstances. As with the character of Jacob Singer, Malcolm Crowe serves to parallel the living viewer coping with feelings of loss and death is used as the mechanism by which these feelings are explored. The notion of mortality and the emotions associated with facing the fear of death must be reconciled before Malcolm can gain a sense of peace. However, the reconciliation of these feelings cannot occur until the narrative fully reveals itself and the viewer can interpret the multi-faceted role of death and its consequences in life.

In a sequence that serves a formal purpose regarding the development of the narrative, Cole is further characterized using a series of emotionally charged editing techniques. Malcolm and Cole are walking together when Cole tells him that he does not tell his mother things because he does not want her to perceive him as a "freak"

like everybody else does. Malcolm wants to comfort the boy and reassures him that he is not a "freak." As the camera cuts to Lynn putting laundry away, the viewer is made privy to the disjointed nature of the mother-son relationship. Cole is trying desperately to hide his strangeness from his mother, yet in his attempts to appear "normal," Lynn senses a notion of lack in the boy, though she cannot name its nature. She stops to notice pictures of Cole from infancy to the present and apparently for the first time, she notices a sliver of light near him in every picture. At the same time, Malcolm gains more information about Cole's father who now lives in Pittsburgh with his toll-booth operator girlfriend. Malcolm explains free association to Cole as the camera shows Cole's mother cleaning his room and finding paper with red writing that appears quite disturbing. In the next shot, Cole refers to the free-association exercise as using "upset words" and Malcolm gets up to leave as he asks Cole to think about what he wants to gain from the sessions. Cole says he would rather express what he does not want, which is to be scared. The narrative has infused the character of Cole with a mystery, which translates into suspicion in the viewer. While the existence of a significant problem of some sort is obvious, the more pressing issue is the reason this problem has affected Cole so deeply in terms of his inability to function adequately in the world. Again, the need the two protagonists have for one another is punctuated; Malcolm will serve as the redemptive factor in Cole's reconciliation of his feelings of loss, sadness, and pain.

As Malcolm continues to investigate Cole's behaviour, he puts his relationship with Anna at further risk. He is consumed with the boy's problem and his need for helping him is emphasized most in instances where, despite his disconnection and

detachment from his wife, he chooses to concentrate on Cole rather than mending his marriage. The consequences of this choice are first articulated when it seems that Anna is beginning to search for affection and intimacy elsewhere. When Malcolm returns from seeing Cole, he goes home and into the basement to research possible theories about Cole's condition; he finds a passage that suggests Cole's scratches may be self-inflicted. The doorbell rings and Anna answers it. Malcolm hears her having a conversation with a male friend and he seems troubled, even jealous by his wife's new acquaintance. Clearly, there is a cost associated with working so diligently to help Cole and the price Malcolm has to pay may contribute further to the loss he has already experienced in his marriage. In another scene, Malcolm returns home and finds the video of his wedding playing on the television while Anna is upstairs in the shower. He sees a bottle of anti-depressants in the medicine cabinet and appears dismayed to learn that his wife is in a state of emotional distress. The door with the red handle remains locked and Malcolm is still unable to open it; again, the colour red hints at the notion that there is something ominous about what lies beyond the door. The frustration Malcolm feels when he is unable to open the door mirrors his frustration about his marriage, or the death he has mistaken for life. While he and Anna have created a distance between them, the introduction of a third party to the relationship creates the potential for a finality to exist where before it did not. Anna's use of medication to numb the pain of a failing marriage coupled with Malcolm's inability to break through the symbolic barrier that exists between them represents the inevitability of a significant loss.

The viewer's suspicion regarding Cole's circumstances is validated in a scene where the boy becomes irrational and loses control for the first time. Until this point in the film, Cole has demonstrated a reserved manner, uncharacteristic of a boy his age. However, his emotions finally overtake him in history class when the teacher asks if anyone knows what the school building was used for a hundred years ago. Cole says they used to hang people in the building, but the teacher corrects him and tells the class it was a courthouse; he is adamant that Cole has received incorrect information. Cole becomes uncomfortable with the way the teacher is looking at him and asks him to stop but the teacher does not seem to know how to oblige. Cole begins to tell him about the stuttering problem the teacher had as a boy in that same school and says the other children called him "Stuttering Stanley." The teacher is shocked that Cole would know this and begins to stutter as Cole repeatedly shouts "Stuttering Stanley" when the teacher finally calls him a freak and tells him to shut up. The scene is one of tension and is highly emotional as Cole feels he is being attacked. The use of shot-reverse-shot between Cole and the teacher is quickened as the tension mounts and ends suddenly when the teacher finally loses control of his own actions and shouts at the boy. In the scene that follows, Cole sits in an oversized chair with his back to the camera in what appears to be the principal's office when Malcolm enters and attempts to engage the boy in conversation. Light enters the dark room through the blinds as they talk over the sounds of children laughing outside. This is the first time in the film that any kind of noticeable lighting is shed on Cole, an explicit representation of the beginning of a process of discovery. The symbolism in the film is hardly subtle, not the least of which includes Cole's surname as Sear and Malcolm's surname as Crowe, a bird

representative of death. However, such trivial techniques do serve to involve the viewer in the narrative process and as sunlight radiates through the blinds onto the boy, the film's intention to expose Cole's mystery as well as its intention to allow Cole to find a sense of peace amid his terrifying experiences is punctuated.

Cole is characterized on a number of levels, including his roles as an abandoned child and an alienated individual. With the loss of his father, Cole has also experienced an inability to function on a social level. Again, the narrative provides a climactic explanation for this imposed alienation, but the effects of the loneliness and ridicule Cole faces at the hands of his peers are felt on a more fundamental level. Regardless of the reasons associated with Cole's label as a "freak" by the other children, he is subjected to painful exclusion from social life. In one particularly affective scene, Cole and his mother are at a party where Cole does not seem to be fitting in with the other children. His mother thanks the hostess for the invitation and tells her that Cole has not been to a party since last year. Cole overhears this as he watches a red balloon float up through the column in the middle of a spiral staircase. He follows the balloon upstairs and hears a man's voice pleading to be let out of what seems to be an open door. At the foot of the stairs, two other boys see Cole and walk up to see what he is doing. They force him into the room where he had heard the voice and lock him in as Cole screams and pleads with them to let him out. Lynn runs upstairs to find him and pounds at the door while Cole is screaming, but the door will not open. When Cole stops screaming, there is an eerie calm as everyone is still and nobody offers to help. Lynn finally opens the unlocked door and carries Cole out, who seems to be unconscious. The scene demonstrates the cruelty that is often perpetuated by children

who tend to single out those who do not fit the mold. While the narrative later provides an answer for Cole's difference, the problem does not reconcile the pain he experiences as the viewer is left with profound images of the boy's emotional distress.

After the birthday party incident, Lynn takes Cole to the hospital and speaks with a doctor who seems to suspect she has something to do with the cuts and bruises on the boy's body. Lynn finds the implication not only offensive, but hurtful because she seems to know that her son is alone in the world and she has done her best to protect him. Malcolm is also there and rolls his eyes in disbelief as the doctor directs Lynn to the hospital social worker. After they leave the hospital, Lynn carries Cole into the house while he sleeps in her arms. She takes him to his room and lays him on the bed when she notices scratches on his back. She telephones the parent of one of the children at school who she suspects is beating her son. It is clear to her now, more than ever, that she is the sole protector of this child.

In the previous scene, Cole is in a hospital bed staring into the darkness outside the window as moonlight shines in through the blinds. Again, both Cole and the viewer are nearing an emotional reconciliation that is symbolized by the light penetrating the darkness. Malcolm enters the room but Cole is despondent. Malcolm attempts to fashion a tale of some sort for the boy's benefit, stumbling when Cole interrupts him with suggestions about how to tell a good bedtime story. For the first time in the film, Malcolm's aura of sadness and detachment is addressed as Cole asks Malcolm why he is sad.

MALCOLM: You think I'm sad? What makes you think that?
COLE: Your eyes told me. . . I'm not supposed to talk about stuff like that.

Malcolm tells Cole about the child he could not help, as though it were a story. He obliquely reveals the problems he has with his wife and about why he wants to help Cole so much. In gaining the boy's trust, Cole feels ready to reveal to Malcolm his own secret and at this point, the film takes a decidedly different turn: Cole reveals to Malcolm that he sees dead people.

MALCOLM: Dead people like in graves and coffins?
Cole shakes his head.
COLE: Walking around like regular people. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're dead.
MALCOLM: How often do you see them?
COLE: All the time. They're everywhere. You won't tell anyone my secret, right?

Malcolm promises not to reveal Cole's secret and to stay with him until he falls asleep. Even in the experiences of a horrified child, the living become the dead and continue to exist on some other level. The viewer is conditioned to suspend disbelief, if not accept the plausibility of such circumstances because, as Hertz states, "at whatever stage of religious evolution we place ourselves, the notion of death is linked with that of resurrection; exclusion is always followed by a new integration" (Hertz 79). When he leaves, Malcolm speaks into his tape recorder and assesses Cole's condition as possible schizophrenia with hallucinations and confesses: "I'm not helping him."

The film is extremely pensive and emotionally expressive when at this point, the narrative machine takes over and imposes an almost empirical explanation to

Cole's problem. However, as much as this device serves to create suspense and even as much as it contributes to the formulaic process, the focus on emotionality is not abandoned and Cole's mysterious secret remains, in fact, congruent with the emotions explored by the film. By showing Cole's reaction to his horrific visions, the viewer is able to connect more fully with the character because their positions are paralleled. In one scene, Cole awakes in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom; he seems frightened and runs in an almost strategic manner toward the bathroom. As he urinates, a shot of the thermostat reveals the temperature drop. A figure passes quickly by the door and Cole follows it to the kitchen thinking it is his mother. In fact, it is a woman, dead, who converses with Cole as though he is her husband. She criticizes him for being so terrible as the camera reveals that her wrists have been slashed. Cole runs, terrified, into his bedroom under his blanket tent. In another scene, Cole talks with Malcolm as they walk down the hall of the school after a theatre performance when Cole abruptly stops in his tracks. For the first time in the film, the viewer is privy to what Cole has been seeing at school: three bodies hanging from the floor above. Malcolm says he cannot see anything and Cole begs him to make them leave. Again, Malcolm is the person in whom Cole chooses to confide rather than his mother, despite her attempts to connect with her troubled son. The loss of his father has created in Cole a fearful defensiveness and he is afraid that his mother will not accept him if she knows his secret and therefore he cannot confide in her for fear that she too will abandon him. Even though she so obviously loves Cole and is constantly making attempts to reassure him of her love and interact with him, such as pushing him playfully in a shopping cart through a parking lot, the boy cannot see beyond his fear

that his mother will also see his secret as reprehensible. In another scene, Cole continues to hide the truth from his mother in order to protect his image in her eyes. At the kitchen table, Cole watches his schoolmate Tommy's claim to fame – the one television commercial in which he has appeared. Lynn adjusts the thermostat, complaining that it is always cold. Lynn asks Cole about a bumblebee pendant that belonged to her grandmother that she found in his drawer. He does not admit that he took the pendant and when she asks him about it directly, he denies having taken it. Lynn is frustrated because she believes her son is lying and dismisses him from the table. Upstairs, Cole sees a boy with the back of his head blown out. The boy offers to show Cole his father's gun. The juxtaposition of these two scenes serves to demonstrate to the viewer the lengths to which Cole will go in order to appear normal in his mother's eyes; he will suffer through this terror alone even though he so desperately need to be comforted. However, later in the evening, Cole asks his mother if he can sleep with her. Lynn embraces him with such love; she seems so sad as she feels Cole shaking. She is pained by the fact that she does not know how to help her son. Again, it is the representation of emotion that serves as the driving force of the film. Even if Cole's secret were more mundane and not as fantastic, the issues surrounding the dissolution of a family are clearly evidenced in their relationship. Cole is mourning the loss of his father and in the face of horrific circumstances, he cannot trust the only other person who could offer him solace and comfort because he is afraid that he will lose her as well. In trying to cope with her own issues surrounding a divorce and a change in the family unit, Lynn is unable to connect with her son in a manner that would reassure him of her commitment and love. The loss of the male

figure in the household has profoundly affected them both and ironically, they cannot come to one another's aid.

The continued added focus on Cole's secret as a narrative device provides the viewer with an explanation of Malcolm's role in the boy's search for peace. The last sequences of the film depict in Cole a readiness to confront his demons and to accept his circumstances; he is able to achieve this resolve with Malcolm's help. The final resolution surrounding the horrors Cole has been experiencing are played out in a short mystery plot. It begins with Malcolm recalling Vincent the night of the shooting saying that he knows why we are afraid when we are alone. Malcolm listens to a tape of a session with Vincent as a child where he apologizes to the boy for leaving him alone for so long; he notes that it is cold in the room. He rewinds the tape to the point where Vincent would have been by himself and hears the boy breathing heavily. He turns up the volume and hears a man speaking Spanish. Malcolm realizes that Vincent was plagued by the same problem that terrorizes Cole. The voice on the tape says, "I don't want to die" in Spanish.

Malcolm and Cole meet in the church and Cole deduces that Malcolm now has some reason to believe him. Malcolm asks Cole what the ghosts want of him and Cole says they just want help. Malcolm agrees and suggests that Cole listen to them but Cole is afraid they are angry and just want to hurt somebody; Malcolm admits he is not certain of their intentions.

Cole soon has the opportunity to test Malcolm's hypothesis when he is asleep in his blanket tent and a red-tinged light surrounds him. He is awakened by his mother talking in her sleep and he goes to console her. When he returns to his bedroom, he

can see his breath from the cold in his tent, where a girl sits. She begins to vomit and Cole is terrified but decides to take Malcolm's advice and speak to her. Again, the viewer is given a visual stimulus as light penetrating the makeshift tent causes red to colour the room and Cole approaches the girl to ask her if she wants to tell him something.

In the next scene, Cole is riding the bus with Malcolm and he tells him about the girl from the night before. For the first time in the film, neither Cole nor Malcolm appear as some kind of detached entity that is completely disconnected from the surrounding world; the two characters are truly aware of one another. They are going to her home where people are mourning the recent death of the girl. Cole intends to expose that she had been poisoned by her mother for two years, who wanted to make it appear as thought the child had cancer, when in fact she was perfectly healthy. As Cole enters the girl's bedroom, he looks at a stainless steel doorknob where a shot of his reflection fills the frame as he turns the knob. He sees the girl in the room and he is afraid, but he takes the box she gives him and goes downstairs to give it to the girl's father. Cole tells him, "She wanted to tell you something." In the box is a videotape of a puppet show the girl was recording when her mother enters and is shown putting some kind of toxic liquid in the girl's lunch. The father confronts the mother, who is wearing a red suit, in front of everyone in the house. Again, the colour red serves to create a sense of tension and anxiety, feelings congruent with notions of death and mortality. The representation of this color at key points in the narrative may also be considered consistent with an Expressionist representation because it stands in jarring contrast to the otherwise flat and subdued mise-en-scène. It becomes a motif of

stylization and even distortion, and also recalls a surrealist tendency in which the space seems to exist in the "real" world, but it is clear that something is somehow "off." Cole sits on the swings with the girl's sister who asks if she is coming back. Cole replies, "Not anymore." It appears that Malcolm has solved the first piece of the puzzle for Cole and that integration into the social sphere and even happiness may be inevitable for the boy.

In the final scene involving Cole, the last loose end is tied up as Cole's role in helping Malcolm is revealed. As Cole prepares for the school play in which Mr. Cunningham (Stuttering Stanley) has given him a part as a stable boy, Cole is talking to a woman who died in a fire at the school. The teacher walks in to call him to the stage where the viewer learns that, in fact, he is playing the part of King Arthur and Tommy the Commercial Kid is playing the village idiot; Cole's dream of acceptance has come true. Malcolm watches the play and later congratulates Cole on his performance. As stained glass windows provide a soothing and almost spiritual background, Cole suggests that Malcolm talk to his wife while she sleeps so that she will listen to him without really knowing it.

COLE: I'm not going to see you anymore, am I?
MALCOLM: I think we've said everything we needed to say. Maybe it's time to say things to someone closer to you.
COLE: Maybe we can pretend like we're gonna see each other tomorrow . . . just for pretend.
MALCOLM: Okay. I'm gonna go now. I'll see you tomorrow Cole.

Malcolm goes home and finds Anna asleep on the sofa with their wedding video playing again; he begins to talk to her.

ANNA: I miss you.
MALCOLM: I miss you too.
ANNA: Why Malcolm? Why did you leave me?
MALCOLM: I didn't leave you.

His wedding ring rolls along the floor as he realizes that he is dead. He plays back recent events in his mind and begins to understand that Anna was not ignoring him, but that she could not see him. Wearing a red dress at the anniversary dinner, she was simply playing out a tradition by herself. Wrapped in a red blanket, Anna's breath can be seen in the air from the cold. Malcolm flashes to the night that Vincent shot him and notices that the wound is actually still there; he died that night on the bed.

MALCOLM: I think I can go now. I just needed to do a couple of things. I needed to help someone; I think I did. And I needed to tell you something: you were never second, ever. I love you. You sleep now. Everything will be different in the morning.
ANNA: Good night Malcolm.
MALCOLM: Good night sweetheart.

White light engulfs Malcolm's face as the camera cuts to their wedding video where they kiss, and the scene fades to black. The connection between Cole and Malcolm has come full circle and the roles they have played in supporting one another have been completed.

Malcolm has guided Cole not only through the process of accepting the nature of his gift (or curse, as it had been described), but also through the grieving process associated with the loss of his father. This turning point in Cole's life is evidenced when the boy finally decides to confide in his mother regarding his secret. Cole and Lynn are in a traffic jam due to an accident up ahead. Lynn apologizes for missing the

play. She is wearing a red sweater, signifying the nature of the conversation that is about to begin.

> COLE: I'm ready to communicate with you now.
> LYNN: Communicate? *
> COLE: Tell you my secrets. You know the accident up there? Someone got hurt, a lady. She died.

Cole tells his mother that he sees the ghosts and that they scare him sometimes. He tells her that they talk to him and want him to do things for them. She reassures him that she does not think he is a freak, but is reluctant to believe him. Cole tells Lynn that her mother visits him and persuades her that he is telling the truth by revealing something that he could not have known: her mother hid in the back to watch Lynn as a child during a dance concert. Lynn is deeply moved and cries as she realizes that he is telling the truth and they embrace. Cole has finally reached a point where he is able to connect with his mother and place his trust in her. The fear of abandonment no longer overrides his need for comfort and security because by coming to terms with his experience with death, the boy has reached a level of understanding that has allowed him to reconcile the loss of his father with the prospect of a fulfilling and happy future.

While the act of actually approaching these dead souls has given the narrative a resolution by giving the characters closure, it has also resulted in the acquisition of a sense of meaning for both Cole and Malcolm. The two are bound by this notion of death and because of it, they are able to transcend the effects of the crippling fear that has been consuming each of them. The notion of death and Cole's and Malcolm's relationship to it are symbolic of the loss of a loved one, in Cole's case his father and in Malcolm's case his wife, and the loss of the safe and loving family unit, much like the

loss faced by Jacob Singer. While the secret that has been haunting the little boy has lent itself well to the creation of a suspenseful and thrilling narrative, it is in the deeper feelings of loss experienced by the two protagonists that the film's resolution bears a mark of authenticity. At the same time, the viewer is persuaded to address more personal feelings associated with the profound grief that comes with losing a mainstay in one's life, whether that is a parent, another person, or even a sense of comfort and familiarity that is revoked when entering the realm of the unknown.

CHAPTER V: *THE OTHERS*
When death has been mistaken for life

When a film works to create an elaborate and strategic design solely for the benefit of a single character, each thread is revealed to contribute to a focused and meticulous tapestry. If the viewer is incorporated into this exercise, the film truly acquires a cathartic sensibility and encourages further interpretation and application, allowing it more than simply entertainment value. Like Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality*, Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* is such a film although, like *The Sixth Sense*, it is not completely free from the formulaic devices that make up the lexicon of which the mystery genre is composed.

The film opens with a voice-over narration by the mother, Grace, who is telling her children the Creation Story as sketched illustrations in sepia tones pass from frame to frame. The pictures serve as an overall map of the story line of the film until the final sketch, a drawing of a house in the country, materializes into a photographic image over which a subtitle announces that the setting is 1945 Jersey, in the Channel Islands. Again, the photograph is figured as a motif that represents the fragility of life and strangely, a document of death, and serves to foreshadow the nature of the protagonists' existence. The film begins to characterize the main protagonist, Grace, almost immediately so that the narrative becomes increasingly centered upon her progression from being a lonely, grieving mother of two to being an active participant in her own fate, enlightened with a modicum of knowledge and understanding. While the other characters in the film are certainly notable and contribute to a layered

narrative, they all seem to be employed for the purpose of guiding Grace toward an acceptance of her circumstances and an understanding of her existence.

Like Jacob Singer, Cole Sear, and Malcolm Crowe, Grace is a product of her situation, coping with the loss of her husband and her familiar family life. She makes references to the hardships she has endured as a result of the war, such as adjusting to living without electricity, and seems to consider herself an emotionally strong woman. Initially, the film supports this characterization, beginning with her first encounter with the servants. A man and two women arrive at her front door to inquire about employment. Grace believes that they have come in response to an advertisement she placed in the newspaper for custodial staff, after all her servants had abruptly left a week before. Grace informs them very matter-of-factly that her husband left for war a year and a half ago and that she has heard no word of him. She is cold and distant in her statement of this fact and does not allow her emotional side to show in the least. This can be seen as the first example in which Grace has not accepted the loss of her husband, nor has she embarked on the grieving process. Rather, she has become detached and emotionally distant, focusing on tasks and attempting to exert an unnatural level of control over her surroundings. She is the epitome of repression and hesitates to show even the slightest emotion. This characterization of Grace as being emotionally repressed, particularly accented by her rigid demeanor and austere manner of dress, suggests another reference to Expressionism. Such behaviour invokes the highly repressed societies of 19th century Germany and Victorian England, where there was a high level of social and state discipline. Grace is a figure who, like these societies, demonstrates the need for expression and emotional liberation. Further, as a

character representative of subdued repression, Grace personifies the notion of death. As a common denominator among most representations of death, Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin describe "death's double position as anomalous, marginal, repressed, and at the same time masterful, central, everywhere manifest." They describe the "gesture of repression . . . as multiply encoded [and] infinitely various" (Bronfen, Goodwin 19). Like Jacob, who is a victim of violent hallucinations and memories, and like Cole, who is tormented by the spirits of the dead, Grace is haunted by the life she used to have. In order to cope in the present, she has managed to completely disavow almost every emotion that would require an interpersonal connection, even with her children. Presumably, her husband managed the affairs of the house, but now that he is gone, she has taken on the lead role and in doing so, has created for herself a distraction that allows her to avoid dealing with her own feelings of loss and abandonment.

The characterization of Grace as emotionally repressed also represents a modern perspective regarding the reluctance to face notions of mortality. In *The Eclipse of Eternity*, Tony Walter raises a number of conflicting positions surrounding a modern societal view of death. He plays the devil's advocate in supporting the position that although medical technology has eased many of the fears associated with death, particularly sudden and untimely death, it remains an anxiety-inducing notion that has been relegated to the level of the unconscious as a coping mechanism.

> Some readers may object that death *is* a problem today, in fact so much of a problem that we repress it from consciousness (which might also explain the reluctance of sociologists to look at it). If heaven and hell have disappeared from everyday thought, it is because they are repressed along with other reminders of mortality. (Walter 60)

Viewed from this perspective, then, Grace functions as a symbol of not only emotional repression as a means to exert control over her surroundings, but also as a symbol of the need to repress any sense of understanding regarding human mortality for the notion itself is far too terrifying.

As Grace leads Mrs. Mills, Mr. Tuttle, and Lydia throughout the house, her demeanor is cold and emotionally detached. She is utterly focused on the task at hand as she incessantly closes and locks every door behind her. She tells the new staff members that they must do the same and that compliance in this regard is imperative, but she does not yet inform them that it is because her children are photosensitive and cannot be exposed to light. She does, however, inform them that she values peace and quiet and that noise upsets her migraine. As she takes the servants to meet her children, Grace has presented herself as removed from the joys of life and militant in the mundane aspects of existence. Even her children, while very precocious creatures and extremely interesting characters, do not provide her the fulfillment often associated with motherhood. In fact, it is as though the absence of her husband has only aggravated her duties regarding her children, contributing to a sense of loneliness and in some ways, even disdain. Grace later instructs Mrs. Mills to pay no mind to the fantasies and "strange ideas" of her children, particularly Anne. She describes the nature of their existence in the house as being unbearable unless one keeps a "cool

head," implying that she does not indulge any immature or disrespectful behaviour from the children. Again, the mechanism of repression is highlighted, and Grace is determined to force her children to behave in the manner she demands in this regard. She is afraid to face the terrifying ramifications of her own actions and is intent on invoking "all kinds of psychological mechanisms to defend [herself] from anxiety, most of which involve pushing the anxiety down into the subconscious" (Walter 66). It is only through her conversations with Mrs. Mills that Grace's emotions are even remotely revealed. At one point, she confides to the servant that she feels totally isolated in her home and that the absence of visitors and the cold, gloomy fog have contributed to her alienation. She later talks with Mrs. Mills by the fire and says that "everybody leaves this damned island." Grace tells Mrs. Mills that her family left in 1940 and that she has not seen them since. She seems unable to find solace in the company of Anne and Nicholas and is incapable of embarking on a path of reconciliation regarding the loss of her husband. Grace clearly loves her children and does her best to take care of them; however, in order to meet her own needs, she has created for them an extremely restrictive environment, lacking the loving affection that would balance out the militant discipline.

A convenient narrative device that allows for the mood of the film to remain dark and grim throughout is the explanation of the children's "condition." Before introducing the servants to Anne and Nicholas, Grace closes all the shutters and lights a lamp as she goes into their bedroom to wake the children. She explains to the servants that the children are photosensitive, a condition tantamount to an allergy to light. If they are exposed to anything brighter than candlelight or a dim lamplight, they could

suffocate and die. While the house itself is a cold, stone grey and creates a rather menacing mood on its own, it is the constant darkness that renders the setting of the film truly ominous. It is similar to *A Pure Formality* in this regard, where the building itself might be considered another character in the film, or contain, as Gould describes von Sternberg's films, "strange landscapes which exert their personalities" (Gould 50). While the manor house is very different from the squalid little police station, the two locales both serve to externalize the emotional tone of the characters. The dingy, gloomy house is surrounded by darkness and nothingness, for even during the day, fog and cloud do not allow the light to penetrate. Also here is the representation of shadows, subdued colours, and muted tones, which create a mood of tension and anxiety. Further, this mood is directly linked to the notion that Grace, like Onoff, must face death and the building itself is the manifestation of this concept, a place that induces fear and anxiety because it cannot be known.

After meeting the children and confirming their employment with Grace, Mrs. Mills takes Anne and Nicholas to the kitchen for breakfast and tells them that the servants who have left will not be coming back. Nicholas likens their absence to his father's, but Anne is adamant in stating that "Daddy IS coming back." Anne questions Mrs. Mills as to whether or not she will leave them and the portly woman is sympathetic as she reassures the girl that she will not leave. Anne confides that the others said they would not leave as well and hesitates as she reveals that "Mommy went mad." Nicholas shouts that nothing happened but Anne is firm in her response that something did happen. Clearly, it is not only Grace who has lost a husband, but the children who have lost a father as well as the security associated with the family

unit. Like Cole, Nicholas and Anne cannot let go of the life they used to have and they hold on to the hope that someday, they might have that life again.

Grace exerts her control over the children in almost every facet of their lives. The most significant aspect of this control involves her rigorous instruction of Christian morals and principles not only because she is able to use the religious message in all areas of her strict regime, but also because it is in this context that Anne begins to emerge as an independent thinker and to free herself from her mother's control. Grace schools Nicholas and Anne at home, using Biblical stories as the framework for a moral education. They read a story from early Christian scripture when Anne announces that she would have denied Christ to the Romans if it meant saving her life. Nicholas agrees and Grace reminds them that children who lie spend eternity in Limbo when they die and she orders them to recite the four levels of Hell, in which Limbo is included. She has them close their eyes and imagine eternity in a hot, awful place, always in pain. Grace reiterates that the children in the story were morally correct in telling the Romans that they believed in Christ and decides that for the remainder of the day, the children will study in separate rooms. Again, the detachment between Grace and her children is punctuated by her refusal to allow them to think for themselves and her determination to limit their exposure to that which is not congruent with her beliefs and practices. Her use of control over the children and her surroundings facilitates an existence that does not require reflection or emotional involvement; she can focus on disciplining her children and her staff and tending to the compulsive pursuit of order.

Not only does Grace attempt to force her beliefs on the children, she also works to restrict any expression of their own beliefs. The narrative provides a logical reason for Grace's abhorrence of "strange ideas," particularly when Anne speaks of the supernatural. She does not want to address the nature of her existence and is therefore wont to control anyone who may attempt to lead her to the revelation that she and her children have, in fact, entered the "next life" at her own hand. In naming the fear and therefore recognizing her own mortality, Grace would be forced to address her terror regarding death and the ultimate loss of control, which she is not ready to do at this point in the narrative. Initially, it is Anne who represents the greatest risk of exposing the truth to Grace, for she seems quite comfortable with the strange occurrences that begin to overtake the house. Unlike his sister, Nicholas demonstrates a fear of the unknown and leads Grace into a position where she must at least obliquely address her son's fears. When left alone in the room to study, he asks his mother, "What if I see a ghost?" Grace is convinced that Anne has been telling him stories, but she tries to console him by suggesting he clutch his rosary whenever he is afraid because the Lord will then be with him and the fear will go away. Nicholas is not convinced but Grace persists by telling him that when the Lord is with him, no harm can come to him. While she seems to be making a sincere effort in comforting her son, Grace is still somewhat distant and unable to summon the emotional connection necessary to make him feel truly safe and secure. However, the boy wants his mother's advice to be a solution for him; when she leaves, he looks around the darkened room and clings to his rosary. Again, the focus on the supernatural, which becomes more prevalent later in the film, is characteristic of an Expressionist representation. The Expressionist

movement prompted an increased interest in magic, horror, and the Other World which represented the anxiety of the society. In *The Others*, this theme is a manifestation of the fear in which Grace is living and the horror associated with facing death and, in Grace's case, the horror of facing her life.

Like Cole, Malcolm, and Jacob, Grace embarks on the path to discovery and acceptance of loss with the introduction of the notion of death. In narrative terms, death serves as a device in the film where the impetus for the mystery can be traced. However, on a more fundamental level, as in *Jacob's Ladder* and *The Sixth Sense*, death is the mechanism by which Grace's emotions can be explored as she starts to lose the control she has crafted for herself and is forced to reconcile her feelings of loss and accept the nature of her existence. This begins with Anne's rebellion against her mother as the girl denounces some of Grace's beliefs and guides her toward a sense of awareness. While alone in the sitting room one day, Grace hears a whimpering and rushes to Nicholas, clumsily opening and locking doors behind her. He seems fine, so she deduces that it must be Anne who is crying, but she also says that she is fine. Grace is stunned that neither of the children was making the noise and begins to doubt Anne.

GRACE: So I imagined it, did I?
ANNE: No, it was that boy.
GRACE: What boy?
ANNE: Victor.
GRACE: Who's Victor?
ANNE: That boy who was here a moment ago. I told him to let me study but he wouldn't stop crying. I think he's a spoiled brat. He said we had to leave the house.
GRACE: Did he now? And why was he crying?

ANNE: Because he doesn't like this house but
he has to live here. His father's a pianist . . .
GRACE: Oh his father's a pianist, is he?
ANNE: Yes. And I already told him he isn't
allowed to touch the piano. He isn't, is
he mommy?
GRACE: So you've spoken to his father as well?
ANNE: No, only with Victor. His father's with
the others in the hall.
GRACE: But I've just come from the hall and
there's no one there.
ANNE: They must've gone upstairs. They're
viewing the house.
GRACE: That'll do, Anne. That's enough!

Grace is alarmed when Anne tells her that Victor has left the room and she notices that the door behind her is slightly ajar. In the next scene, Grace scolds Mrs. Mills and Lydia who deny having left the door open. Grace is incredulous at the suggestion that she might make such a mistake that would endanger the life of her daughter. She refuses to lose control, even though it is becoming clear that her hold on Anne is weakening and that her own sanity is at risk.

At the dinner table, Anne recounts to Nicholas her encounter with Victor. She toys with him and is amused that he is so afraid and later that night while the two children are in bed, Victor opens the curtains and communicates with Anne. While he cannot be seen, both Nicholas and the viewer can hear that there is someone in the room, although it seems possible that Anne is simply toying with her brother and conjuring up a voice. As Nicholas becomes increasingly terrified, he screams and Grace rushes into the bedroom to investigate. She is upset with Anne although the child denies that she did anything wrong. The next day, Anne is punished for terrorizing her brother in such a manner although she maintains her innocence.

Further, her resolve to break free of her mother's control intensifies as she tells her that she will not be going to Limbo because Limbo is only for children who have not been baptized. Grace is shocked at the prospect that she is losing control over her daughter. As a highly disciplined and compulsive individual, Grace must retain the control she has gained or the context she has created for herself may be redefined. She is determined not to allow Anne to gain a sense of independence and continues her punishment for three days. Mrs. Mills feels this may be excessive but Grace maintains that it is Anne's choice as to how long it will go on.

> GRACE: She's got to learn to swallow her pride
> and ask for forgiveness. Anyway, it's
> about time she started to read the Bible.

It is not until circumstances begin to override Grace's hold on the house that she loses control. The revelation that death is somehow surrounding them forces Grace to reevaluate her existence and come to terms with the loss of everything she had known in life.

The nature of Grace's existence is called into question when the strange things occurring in the house begin to manifest themselves to everyone, not only to Anne. While much of the suspense of the film is gained by playing on the viewer's expectations, the progressive manner in which Grace is made aware of the repercussions of her actions allows for an effective emotional characterization of the repressed woman. When Grace begins to start hearing running footsteps upstairs, Anne tells her that they are coming from "the intruders," who intend to take control over the house and plan to take down all the curtains. Grace, while somewhat afraid of these occurrences, does not believe her daughter and begins to search the house

frantically in hopes of finding a rational explanation. While this hint at the mystery surrounding the house and its inhabitants serves a particular narrative function – it provides the viewer with a piece of the puzzle and encourages him to attempt to "solve" the mystery – it more poignantly serves to demonstrate the walls surrounding the belief system Grace has built around herself begin to crumble. She cannot find a rational explanation for what is going on around her, at least not one that is congruent with her staunch and unwavering Christian belief system. The children, however, are not as resolute in following the teachings of the Bible. They tell Mrs. Mills that they don't believe everything that is written in the Bible, but like Cole Sear, they would not disclose such a thing to their mother for fear of her reaction. Even at a young age, these are the kind of children who have come to understand that they play a particular role in the family unit and now that the unit has been compromised, they fear further change and attempt to maintain a sense of normalcy, however futile this endeavor might be.

When images and notions of death are manifested in a more direct and indisputable manner, Grace is placed on the inevitable path toward acceptance. First, she finds a "Book of the Dead" in which photographs of dead bodies have been archived. Mrs. Mills explains to her that long ago, people believed that this practice would allow the souls of the dead to go on living through the photographs, but Grace scoffs at the stupidity of such a superstition. Again, the motif of the photograph is used to represent the weakness and fragility of life, or more specifically, the image of death. Unlike the films discussed previously, *The Others* uses this motif less symbolically and instead the photographs function on a much more literal level in their association with

the representation of death. For Grace, death is something to be feared and she is not yet capable of confronting this fear or the weakness of her constructed belief system. In order to shield herself from the truth (for her, the truth is that she is dead, for the viewer, the truth is that we will all die someday), she has mistaken not only death for life, as have the protagonists in the films discussed earlier, but she has mistaken life for death. The intruders are characterized as ghosts based on Anne's description of them when, in fact, they are the living and Grace, the children, and the servants are dead. The darkness that surrounds her, both figuratively and literally, has become for her a source of comfort. This creates a disconnect between the protagonist and the viewer because while Grace is at home in this austere and somber landscape, the viewer is overwhelmed by a sense of tension and anxiety. It is not until "the others" are introduced, with the notion of death, that Grace's emotions begin to parallel those of the viewer. As in the films discussed previously, death becomes the unifying idea that elicits the emotions of fear and anxiety, with which the viewer identifies. When Grace feels terrorized by the presence that has entered her home, the viewer is encouraged to feel her fear and anxiety. These feelings are directly associated with the dread of death, the fear of the unknown and the trepidation of confronting these concepts.

Eventually, Grace becomes more apprehensive of her surroundings and objects begin to take on a malicious quality. This also recalls a theme often found in German Expressionism in which not only people become possessed, but objects too become tools of evil and malice. The film foregrounds the bizarre and uncanny as represented in the house primarily through mise-en-scène. One night, Grace goes into the children's bedroom to look in on them. She whispers lovingly to Anne and asks her

forgiveness for being so strict. Anne pretends to be asleep while Nicholas asks Grace when Daddy will be coming home. Clearly, Grace is uneasy about such a question, because the loss of her husband has affected her as well, and she finds it difficult to be the source of comfort for the children in this regard. However, she tries to explain to the boy the concept of men going off to war, although her reassurance is not very convincing. Grace weeps alone downstairs, when she hears music coming from the piano. She is positioned in the center of the frame in a medium shot crouched against an armoire, surrounded by almost complete darkness. When she hears the music, she arms herself with a rifle and goes to investigate but finds nobody sitting at the piano and the room completely empty. She abruptly closes the piano cover and locks it before she leaves the room. During this scene, the shots are composed of inanimate objects in the music room, illuminated only by the flame of the small candle that Grace carries. The camera tracks slowly, following Grace as she moves from the right of the frame to the left. This creates a mood of tension and anxiety, as the viewer is positioned to perceive the room from Grace's perspective and this contributes to the ominous atmosphere. However, once the tension reaches its pinnacle, severe and frenetic editing is usually favoured. When Grace exits the music room, the door slams in her face and she is unable to open it again until Mrs. Mills appears at the scene; when they enter the room only moments after the door has slammed, they find that the piano cover has been inexplicably unlocked and pulled open. This brief period of action is composed of several quick shots, with each cut drawing the viewer closer to the encounter. It is at this point that Grace begins to feel a presence in the house,

"something demonic, something which is not at rest." Mrs. Mills confides to Grace that she believes some things cannot be explained.

> MRS. MILLS: I think that sometimes, the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living.
> GRACE: But that's impossible. The Lord would never Allow such an aberration – the living and the dead. They will only meet at the end of eternity. It says so in the Bible.

Even as Grace recites the "truth" of the Bible in which she has so firmly believed, she does not seem as sure of the words now. She makes these statements with an obvious air of uncertainty as Mrs. Mills assures her that "there isn't always an answer for everything." Grace is now open to the idea that there may be something supernatural surrounding the mysterious occurrences, so she decides to fetch the village priest to bless the house. While she has succumbed to the prospect that her belief system is not absolute, she cannot abandon it completely and still holds a measure of faith in the Christian doctrine that has defined her world thus far.

The sense of loss that most permeates Grace's existence is the absence of her husband. She cannot accept that he has died, yet she has managed to find a way to function without him, largely due to her conviction and discipline. However, when she sees her husband Charles approaching the house from the fog, it is as though her dreams have come true and whatever progress she has made toward accepting her circumstances has come to a grinding halt. After they exchange a few words and Grace comments on Charles's appearance being different, they return to the house where the children become overjoyed at the sight of their father. While Grace is now determined to disregard all the strange occurrences of late and simply wishes to settle into the life

she once knew, Anne again begins to question that which her mother has accepted as fact.

ANNE: Mommy, when people die in the war, where do they go?
GRACE: What a question! It depends.
NICHOLAS: On what?
GRACE: Well, on whether they fought on the side of the goodies or the baddies. Your father, for example, fought for England, on the side of the goodies.
ANNE: How do you know who the goodies and the baddies are?
GRACE: That's enough questions. Eat your food, you'll never go to war.
NICHOLAS: We'll never go anywhere.
GRACE: Oh, you're not missing out on anything. You're much better off at home with your mommy and daddy who love you very, very much.
ANNE: And the intruders.
GRACE: There are no intruders here.
ANNE: But you said that there were . . . !
GRACE: No, I said that there are no intruders here and I don't want to hear another word on the subject.
ANNE: You said . . . !
GRACE: That is enough!
ANNE: Can I say something?
GRACE: No!
ANNE: Why not?
GRACE: Because . . . because you can't!

Anne begins to breathe heavily and is visibly upset. The girl is in her room crying when Mrs. Mills comes to comfort her and assure her of the intruders' existence and says, "sooner or later she'll see them. Then everything will be different." She is referring to Grace's inevitable acceptance of the nature of their existence. Grace, even as a being in some kind of afterlife, cannot accept that she has, in fact, killed her children and herself and that they no longer belong to the world of the living. The

narrative suggests that the woman became overwhelmed by the loss of her husband and the demands of raising two children on her own and in the ultimate loss of control and reason, suffocated her children and then turned a rifle on herself. Like Malcolm Crowe, Grace is not ready to let go of the life she has known. The loss of her husband, too great to bear, is paralleled with the loss of life. Her death, and the death of her children symbolizes the new existence they are now forced to navigate without a husband and father. Again, like Malcolm Crowe and Jacob Singer, Grace must reconcile the loss of the family unit to which she so desperately clung with the prospect of a continued existence that contradicts everything she believes.

Charles is a figure that represents a significant loss in Grace's life, so it is strange that he is the one who initiates the final phase of Grace's acknowledgement of her death. First, because he has, up to this point, served as the reason that she has disavowed any knowledge or acceptance of the nature of the intruders and second, because he himself is unaware that he is dead. Mrs. Mills states that he does not know where he is and after the climax of the film unfolds, it is clear that Charles is in the same state as Grace is at this point – unable to accept the loss of his life and unable to reconcile the nature of his existence. However, after speaking with Anne, he questions Grace about the events that have occurred while he has been away.

CHARLES: Anne told me everything.
GRACE: I wish I had an explanation for what happened. At first I thought there was someone else in the house. I even thought that there were ghosts.
CHARLES: I'm not taking about the ghosts. I'm talking about what happened that day.
GRACE: I don't know what you're talking about.
CHARLES: Tell me it's not true. Tell me what happened.

GRACE: Happened? I don't know what came over me that day. The servants had left during the night; they hadn't the courage to tell me to my face. They knew that I couldn't leave the house! They knew! You must forgive me, Charles.
CHARLES: Not me. The children.
GRACE: They know that I love them. They know I'd never hurt them, I'd die first. What are you going to do? Are you angry with me?
CHARLES: I just came back to say goodbye to my wife and children. Now I must go.
GRACE: Go where?
CHARLES: To the front.
GRACE: No, the war is over!
CHARLES: The war is not over.

Grace pleads with Charles to stay and chastises him for going to war and leaving his family. She fears he is abandoning her and when she wakes to find him gone, she goes to the front gate and stares into the woods in disbelief. It is at this point that Grace finally becomes capable of coping with the circumstances in which she finds herself. In the context of Elisabeth Bronfen's notion of the dual function of repetition, Grace has learned that it may be best if the lost object is never found. The return of her husband, while serving a narrative purpose as well as allowing Grace to move on as an emotionally functional individual, has shattered the existence to which she so desperately clung. Now that Charles is gone and a sense of closure has been forced upon her, Grace must find a way to navigate through the rest of her existence with the knowledge that the life she had known is both figuratively and literally over. This realization is punctuated by Anne's shrill scream and Grace is shaken into protective mode as she rushes to the aid of her child. When Grace arrives at the scene, she hesitates to notice the glaring problem: the curtains in the bedroom have been removed

and light is pouring into the room. Grace wraps Anne and Nicholas under a heavy blanket and leads them out of the room only to find that the curtains have been removed from every window and the entire house is flooded with daylight.

Grace finally takes the children to a darkened room and briefly examines them; she is surprised to find that they seem completely well and that despite the exposure to so much light, no harm has come to them. The previous sequence demonstrates the not so subtle symbol of light as truth and knowledge. As in the other films, the light of day, or even light in general, becomes synonymous with the realization to which each of the central characters must come. The single most important factor for Grace and the children, as she tells them, is that "Daddy is gone." The knowledge that there can be no hope for the life they had before the film opened is neatly summarized by the fact that Charles has left. This has opened the door to Grace's own acceptance of the actions that have resulted in her death and the death of her children. Still, however, she is unable to reach that conclusion on her own and must go through the final paces that will lead her to the truth. She leaves the children in the room and rushes out to find out what happened. She grills Lydia about what she knows and Mrs. Mills enters and tries to calm the now hysterical woman. Mrs. Mills and Mr. Tuttle suggest that the children may no longer be photosensitive, but Grace is shocked at the ridiculous proposition and demands that they return their keys and leave her house, which she suspects they are attempting to take from her. Once outside, Mrs. Mills suggests to Mr. Tuttle that they uncover the gravestones and it becomes clear to the viewer that the servants know exactly what is going on and are perhaps deeply involved. Later that night, the children are alone in their bedroom when Anne decides to leave the house and look for

her father. She climbs out of the window into the night air and Nicholas, afraid of being left alone, follows. The children walk through the woods in their nightgowns while Anne remains calm and Nicholas is quite scared. Grace, meanwhile, climbs the stairs and finds the children's beds empty. Anne and Nicholas find the graves and Anne approaches them to investigate further. Grace looks around the room for the children and sees a piece of paper under the bed dated December 1891. She picks it up and turns it over to find that it is a photograph of Mr. Tuttle, Mrs. Mills, and Lydia, dead. Meanwhile, Anne finds a name on the gravestone outside and appears shocked. She and Nicholas turn around to find the three servants approaching and Anne warns Nicholas not to speak to them because they are dead. Grace runs through the house, screaming for her children. She sees them and instructs the children to run and hide upstairs as Mrs. Mills affirms the fact that she and Mr. Tuttle and Lydia are dead, but remains eerily calm as she explains that the living and the dead must all live together. She assures Grace that the intruders have removed all the curtains when they hear the children scream from upstairs.

> MRS. MILLS: The intruders have found them.
> MR. TUTTLE: There's nothing we can do now.
> MRS. MILLS: You'll have to go upstairs and talk to them.

Grace makes her way up the stairs as she recites the Lord's Prayer. She still cannot abandon her faith, even though every moment is serving as a contradiction to her entire belief system. She hears the voice of a woman addressing the children and it becomes clear that this old woman serves as a medium between the world of the dead and the living. The narrative twist is that Grace and the children are dead, though the stern mother cannot quite accept the truth until she hears it spoken.

OLD WOMAN: Why are you crying children?
What happened to you in this room?
What did your mother do to you?

Anne whispers into the old woman's ear.

Is that how she killed you?
With a pillow?
ANNE: She didn't kill us!
OLD WOMAN: Children, if you're dead, why do you
remain in this house?
ANNE: We're not dead!

The children scream that they are not dead as Grace throws papers in the air and pounds on the table, also screaming that they are not dead. The camera cuts from a shot of Grace tossing the papers to a shot of the papers flying about the room on their own as the people seated at the table stare in fear and disbelief. The "intruders" decide that they will leave the house in the morning.

Grace holds the children on the stairs, finally in the full realization that she, together with Anne and Nicholas, no longer belong to the world of the living. She relives that day in her mind, and explains how she suffocated the children with a pillow and then turned the rifle on herself. But when she later heard the children playing, she thought that "the Lord in His great mercy had given [her] another chance." She admits to now feeling unsure and afraid. Mrs. Mills comes in and offers her experience with death and informs Grace and the children that the intruders will be leaving. However, she is firm in stating that others will come and sometimes they will sense them and sometimes they will not because "that's the way it's always been." When the children ask Grace if their father died in the war and Grace says that he did; Charles again serves as a poignant reminder that the world they had once known is no longer their

own. However, Grace is now finally at the point where she can accept that everything she thought she knew is not as definitive as she had believed. She seems almost at peace with the knowledge that she has no means of navigating through this new existence and that her beliefs have ultimately proven to be unfounded despite the evidence she saw in the Bible. She also seems to have abandoned her need to control the children and her strict, disciplinarian demeanor now seems unnecessary and futile.

> ANNE: Will we ever see him again?
> GRACE: I don't know.
> ANNE: If we're dead, is this Limbo?
> GRACE: I don't know. I don't know if there even is a Limbo. I'm no wiser that you are. But I do know that I love you, that I've always loved you. And this house is ours.

The three of them repeat that the house is theirs as the camera cuts to Anne dancing in front of the window, basking in the daylight. Grace repeats that no one can make them leave as Victor and his parents drive away. Mr. Tuttle closes the front gate to reveal a "For Sale" sign as the scene fades to black. The film does not engage in a positive resolution as do the other films discussed here. Although Onoff embarks on his journey alone, he has been guided by the officers and staff of the station and has reached a point of acceptance regarding his death. He understands that the loss of his life has enabled him to pursue a new existence. Malcolm Crowe is also able to accept his fate and is allowed to resolve the issues that have detained him from his new existence. He takes comfort in the opportunity to make peace with his past and to bid his dear wife one final goodbye. Jacob Singer is perhaps the most poignant example of a character that has completely abandoned his connection to the world of the living, because he is joining his beloved son in the afterlife. His journey up the stairs toward

the light is depicted as joyful and for the first time in the film, Jacob Singer is at peace. However, while Grace must accept her new existence, she seems determined to maintain a hold on her "life," as represented by the house. Further, she and the children are not permitted to move to "a better place" as are all the other protagonists who are ultimately removed from the world after they realize that they are dead. Grace and Anne and Nicholas are almost trapped in the house, unable to travel far beyond the gates and helpless to control the inevitable intrusion of others into their space and the viewer is emotionally invested in their tragedy.

> When we view a fiction film we participate in a ritual designed by the institutions that bring us to the movies. When we assent to the narrative of a film and become 'absorbed' or 'immersed,' we accept an emotional role. We entertain the fiction in our imagination, and it moves us, yet we have a consistent background awareness of its artificiality. (Platinga 379)

The afterlife that this mother and her children will experience is not as rewarding as those of the characters in the other films; they will not spend eternity with Charles and they will be bombarded with reminders from the world of the living. While death is described as a subjective notion in the film, when compared to the other three films, it cannot engage the viewer in a hopeful analysis of feelings of loss as effectively because it does not offer a solution outside the narrative. Where Onoff, Jacob, and Malcolm will travel to a realm where the viewer cannot accompany them, Grace and the children are doomed to replay the same narrative each time their home is visited upon by intruders.

CONCLUSION

Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder*, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality,* and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* discuss and explore the fear and horror associated with facing death in an attempt to affect and engage the viewer regarding its inevitability. The anxiety surrounding this still-taboo subject is rooted in the feeling that not even the most powerful among us can fully control the end of the natural cycle of life. And in this loss of control, we can only be left with fear: the fear of loss, the fear of pain, the fear of the unknown. There even exists a system by which the psychological stages of coping with death are defined, albeit usually within the context of a doctor's office or support group. The death of a loved one is often a traumatic experience, one that first gives rise to feelings of loss and even abandonment and ultimately, creates a need to put one's own life in perspective. These four films function as vehicles by which these feelings of loss can be articulated, from Jacob's experience with the painful absence of his son to Grace's internal battle that results from losing her husband. The viewer is privy to Anna's feelings of desperation and hopelessness without Malcolm. Young Cole in *The Sixth Sense* has had the harsh and unwanted truth of mortality thrust upon him, and his pervasive knowledge of death ultimately brings about an emotional and spiritual awakening. Even Onoff, while his solitude seems to have been self-made, is representative of a life devoid of emotional connections and dependencies, a consequence that the characters in the other films must face as a result of the death of a loved one.

The use of children in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* allows the viewer to recall the way in which the world can appear frightening and unknown. The children also add to the intermittent surrealist sensibility as images of the marvelous are conjured through a "perturbing flux between the imaginary and the real" (Hammond 38). The blend of tragic melodrama with scenes of terror taps into the reservoir of childhood memories through which the viewer can understand the blissfulness of ignorance. These children – Anne, Nicholas, and Cole – are bombarded with the unforgiving truth about death and they must reconcile the realm of fear and anxiety as it constantly pervades their existence.

This realm is depicted not only through the eyes of children, for the sadness and tension that permeates these films is evident to the viewer as well, primarily through cinematography and mise-en-scène. The landscape onto which each of these films is imposed is one of despair and absence; it may well be recognizable to those who have experienced the effects of death. Further, while there may exist a sense of disorientation, these films are not overtly anti-realist; in fact, they allow the viewer to believe that the narratives dwell in a realist environment. However, there is a gradual dissemination of information that reveals the films do not exist in a realist world and that the environment actually works to represent an emotional rather than a physical condition, as well as a connection between the spiritual and the material. Some examples in these films would include the use of prolonged fade-ins and colour in *The Sixth Sense*, the dull and muted tone of *The Others*, and the ubiquitous presence of hallucination sequences and flashbacks in *Jacob's Ladder* and *A Pure Formality*. Also, the menacing quality that pervades *The Others* is accentuated by Amenábar's

own dark and brooding score, as is the noticeable silence that often accompanies many scenes.

It is through this sense of familiarity with the realist realm that the viewer is drawn into the films and can connect with the characters. But as questions arise in each film surrounding the assumptions regarding life and human existence and as mise-en-scène is manipulated to externalize feelings and emotions, the viewer is moved from the realist realm toward a more spiritual and emotional condition, to a narrative of sadness that is derived from witnessing a life cut short. This is the level at which the films gain their greatest force and prove their significance: life takes on meaning for the protagonists when they acknowledge and embrace their subjectivity, and this meaning is only achieved in death. However, death looks a lot like life for these characters, and while not a direct indictment of any particular religious doctrine, the films certainly encourage the viewer to closely examine the nature of human existence and to recognize if not accept the inevitability of death. Further, the sadness associated with experiencing death does not die with the loved one who passes, particularly with a character like Jacob who cannot reconcile the loss of his son, Gabe, and Anna, who dulls her pain with medication after losing Malcolm. The sadness continues and manifests itself in the lives of those who continue living, like Jacob and Anna. It is in this sense that these films are different from most others that address death. They do not gloss over the uneasiness that seems to come with themes of death and dying. They do not conclude in a happy ending or in a resolution where everything is explained. In fact, what these films have in common is their direct approach to representing the trepidation often associated with death and their absolute lack of

closure. Nothing is really resolved at the end of either of these films, certainly nothing is tied up in a neat little package. The common perspective that these films share seems to be that death cannot be defined; rather, it can only be interpreted. These films interpret death as a familiar, albeit somewhat skewed realm that intensifies the sense that ultimately, we have no control. In their representation of a rather precarious subject, feelings of fear, anxiety, and tension are not spared; in fact, the films encourage the viewer to feel these feelings and to work through them until the end, even though solace and comfort cannot be offered.

These films place the viewer in a context similar to those of the protagonists in that a sense of tension and anxiety engulfs the narrative, and those watching it. The narrative structure of each film involves the death of the protagonist, although the fact that the characters are dead is not revealed until the end of the film, which creates a significant relationship between the actual ending and the means by which the directors arrive at this ending. The films become a form of confession, whereby the characters learn of their current situation and are given the opportunity to repent for their sins and continue to exist in some undefined afterlife. The films acknowledge and play upon our worst fears through highly affective characterization and mise-en-scène. The fear and horror associated with confronting mortality is represented in each of these films using Expressionistic devices, such as low-key lighting causing ominous shadows, oppressive architecture shot from severe angles, and thematically, the notion that the world is a crazy place where things may not be as they seem. These elements are also explored through a surrealist lens, where mental images are externalized in irrational arrangements, the role of chance is paramount, and a new truth is offered behind the

curtain of what was perceived as "reality." That these films derive their force from powerful narratives that operate on an emotional level regarding feelings of fundamental loss and sadness further speaks to the ability of cinema to provide fictional answers to real-life issues. While the characters are led to the realization that they have, in fact, experienced death and are now on a new horizon, the viewer travels with them, ritualistically going through the emotions associated with loss and trauma. The fear of death and the apprehension regarding its inevitability are addressed in these films by guiding the viewer along a deliberate path in a systematic manner. The feelings associated with the weakness and fragility of life are confronted; the films assign a narrative machine to the process of death and loss yet at the end, there can be no answers, no conclusions.

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